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School Turnaround in Texas' A-F System: Perceptions from District Leaders of Systems that Lead to Rapid and Sustainable Change in an Urban School District

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by

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family, especially my soulmate and wife, Alandra. This simply would not have been possible without your support. You selflessly took on so many extra responsibilities which added to our already hectic schedules. Your strength and constant resolve were an inspiration, allowing me to stay the course. The demands of the program combined with the demands of my job presented challenges for our entire family, and you were the anchor for all of us. Words cannot express my gratitude. Thank you! I love you!

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Abstract

School Turnaround in Texas' A-F System: Perceptions from District Leaders of Systems that Lead to Rapid and Sustainable Change in an Urban School District

by

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With the increased transparency and accountability of a single letter grade system used to represent a school's overall effectiveness, school and district leaders are under increased pressure to quickly improve campus and district letter grades. It is important to understand how those influences impact the perceptions, responses, and actions of district central office leadership and staff. Although there is an abundant amount of research that reveals what successful schools have done to quickly improve student performance, evidence of how districts have intentionally structured their central offices and district-level structures to support campus-level turnaround is still limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the organizational structures and support systems that school and district leaders perceive to have the greatest impact on turnaround efforts and sustained academic achievement in an A-F accountability system.

This study explored how one Texas school district positioned its central office to support school improvement efforts that led to improved letter grade ratings at its underperforming schools. This study expanded on current research, identifying specific district systems that positively impacted school turnaround efforts. This study uncovered the importance of removing the bureaucratic barriers that can impede improvement efforts that are often pushed down from central office. Findings of this study suggested that fostering a strong coherence between central office and campuses by investing in intermediary positions, along with clear and efficient means to communicate information and for campus leaders to request support, is pertinent to removing those bureaucratic barriers. Findings also suggested that collecting and analyzing evidence from district assessments allows central office staff to provide differentiated support based on campus needs. Moreover, a reinforced culture of ownership and a collective, "eyes on" approach with stakeholders at all levels of the organization held equally accountable for results, provided further examples of district practices that positively impact campus outcomes. And finally, this study revealed the importance of staff at all levels of the organization having a strong shared belief that all students can perform at equally high levels and that turnaround is possible.

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Chapter One: Introduction

During the 2017-2018 school year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) implemented a new accountability system where schools and districts across the state received letter grades based predominantly on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) results. In August, 2019, all 1,200 school districts and over 8,300 individual schools received A-F letter grades for the first time, with the majority of schools and districts receiving letter grades of C or higher (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The A-F evaluation system is the result of an evolution in attempts to make schools increasingly accountable for improving outcomes for all students (Dalton, 2017). The stakes continue to rise for Texas public schools, as well as the penalties, for districts that consistently do not meet state accountability targets. Campuses and districts that receive D or F ratings must implement Targeted Improvement Plans, with the plans becoming more intensive each year campuses repeat a consecutive failing grade. If a school earns a failing grade for five consecutive years, the commissioner of education will either appoint a board of managers to govern the district or will close the campus (TEA, 2018).

Increased transparency and simplified school performance reports, components of the state's A-F accountability system, have increased pressure on schools and school districts to earn "passing" or high letter grades, especially for district leaders charged with quickly improving academic performance at historically low-performing schools (Dalton, 2017; Murray & Howe, 2017; Tanner, 2016). School improvement efforts have largely focused on turning around these historically low-performing campuses. Despite increased accountability measures and initiatives implemented to improve academic performance at substandard schools, many continue to struggle and fail. However, recent research has emerged, showing that some schools and

districts have implemented programs and systems that proved to be effective in turning around the lowest-performing schools and sustaining long-term success (Estrada, Hammer, & Murray, 2014; Le Floch, 2014; Herman, et al., 2009; Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmtullah, & Tallant, 2010; Reeves, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Research has surfaced at both the campus and district levels suggesting that there are multiple constructs to examine when considering school turnaround efforts. Two distinct strands of research outline practices that have been implemented at the campus and district level that have led to rapid and sustained success. Consistent campus-based practices include identifying highly effective leaders and teachers, establishing a culture of high expectations for all with clear mission and vision statements, utilizing data to drive the decision-making process, presenting visible improvements, building teacher capacity, and providing extended learning time for students (Estrada et al., 2014; Le Floch, 2015; Herman et al., 2009; Kutash et al., 2010; Reeves, 2009). Although a lesser studied aspect of school improvement, district-level initiatives and practices have also shown that practices at the top of school organizations can also have a positive impact on school turnaround efforts (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015; Leithwood, 2010; Zavadsky, 2009). Impactful district-level practices include strategic staffing and restructuring, ensuring a quality curriculum, adjusted resource allocation practices, evidence-based decision making, and strong coherence between central offices and campuses (DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, Haycock, 2007; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton; Johnson et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2016; Zavadsky, 2009). Figure 1 provides a graphic of key school turnaround practices that have led to quick and sustainable turnaround efforts.

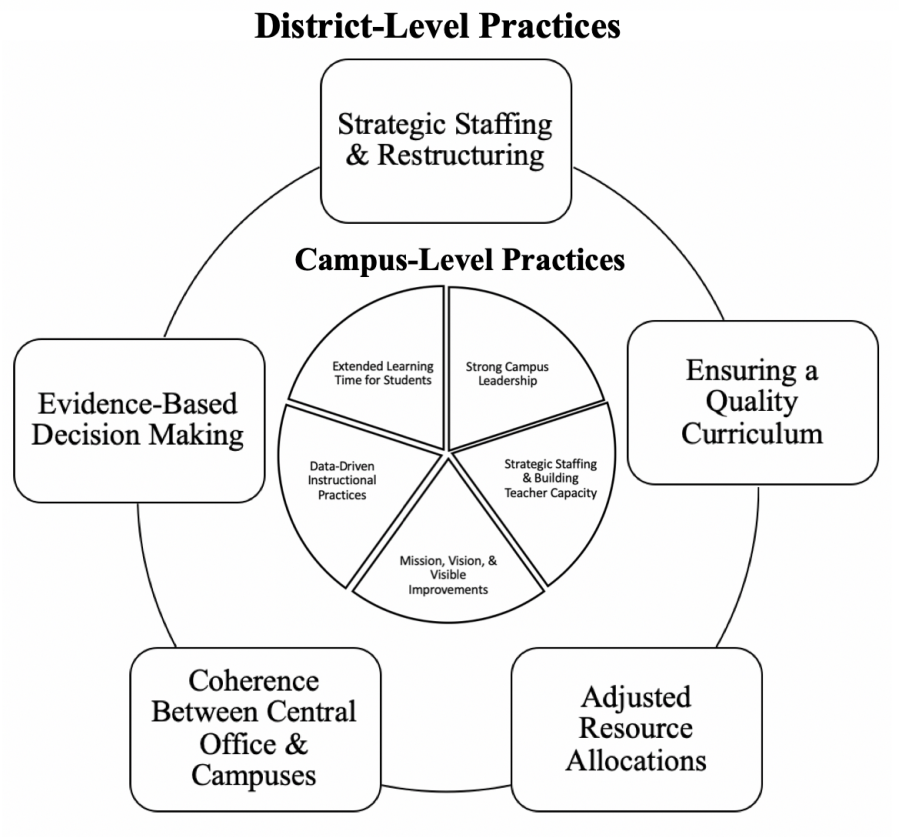

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of District-Level and Campus-Level Turnaround Practices.

Statement of Problem

Despite passing sweeping policies at the federal level, increasing transparency and accountability in newly adopted accountability systems, and substantial investments in school turnaround efforts, many schools continue to fail. Le Floch (2015) maintained that, "while the public imperative to 'fix' the lowest-performing schools remains urgent, figuring out how to do so is rather complicated" (p. 3). One of the challenges that has made school turnaround so difficult to implement has been the fact that the majority of failing schools in urban school systems exist in poor, minority communities that lack resources and consistent support systems. These schools face systemic challenges such as high teacher recidivism rates and schools staffed

with inexperienced or underqualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Lester, 2018). Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, and Lash (2007) have called for systemic and cultural change where leaders are "given the flexibility, resources, and support that teachers and administrators are calling for" to lead to real and long-term change (p. 4). Without district-level systemic changes, schools will continue to struggle, and there will be no long-term solution or real improvement in school turnaround practices.

The pressure for campus and district leaders to increase accountability letter grades at low-performing schools continues to mount, as do the consequences for schools that do not improve. Although studies have clearly identified campus and district practices that have led to positive academic outcomes at low-performing schools, there has been no clear blueprint for central office staff to implement that has led to wide-scale systemic change. Although case study research has highlighted some consistent district-wide practices that have yielded improved academic performance at the campus level (Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009), the research examining specific central office practices remains limited. As state accountability intensifies and increasingly accessible rating systems are implemented, district leaders need to understand how to adequately respond in order to refine systems and provide support structures to improve the lowest-performing schools that serve the neediest students: economically-disadvantaged children, English language learners, and students who represent minority populations. These groups continue to be an expanding population in Texas, one of the fastest growing states in the country, ranking seventh according to the World Population Review (2020). Potter and Hoque (2014) have stated that, "projections suggest the Hispanic population will more than double its size in 2010 to over 20 million by 2050. The non-Hispanic Black population has also been

projected to double in size, growing to over 6 million by 2050" (p. 4). Population and demographic projections are vital in light of the fact that the vast majority of students attending chronically low-performing schools are minority students, many of whom are English language learners (Le Floch, 2015), adding to the urgency of taking action to turnaround chronically unsuccessful schools.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perceptions of campus and district leaders about what specific factors led to quick and sustainable turnaround in their districts. This qualitative study investigated the organizational structures and support systems that school and district leaders perceived to have had the greatest impact on turnaround efforts and sustained academic achievement in an A-F accountability system. The pressure to improve student outcomes in a state system that assigns letter grades to schools and districts, readily understood by families and the community, can provide opportunities for district leaders to look inward to restructure the organization and reallocate resources, leading to academic improvement. Because Texas has become the largest state to adopt an A-F accountability system, with one of the fastest growing demographics for school-age children, identifying successful practices would result in a framework that others across the country could also implement.

Research Questions

As of 2017, sixteen states had adopted accountability systems that assign A-F grades to schools, with more states deciding whether or not they should adopt similar systems after the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Murrary & Howe, 2017). Since then, more and more states have followed suit, including Texas, which phased in its A-F

accountability system in 2017. In the second year of implementation, schools have grappled with the political impact letter grades had on their schools and their communities. School districts responded with great urgency to ensure campuses quickly improved low letter grades. Research questions were based on examining district structures believed to have led to quick increases in academic performance, while also improving and sustaining overall campus letter grades are as follows:

1. What role do cabinet-level administrators and district directors play in improving and sustaining overall campus letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
2. What systems and structures were created at the cabinet or director level to improve and sustain overall letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
3. What barriers were removed to facilitate academic improvement across the district?

Study Design

This study followed a single case study design, analyzing how one urban school district structured and reallocated resources to transform its lowest-performing schools using models that could be adapted and implemented for reforming other schools in need. Utilizing an interpretative approach that follows a phenomenological orientation allows the researcher to seek to understand the perceptions and perspectives of participants' lived experiences of school turnaround efforts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). The main purpose of following an interpretivist approach is to explain and understand the complex human and social realities of participants (Crotty, 1998). A case study approach was selected to glean a better understanding of what specific practices and structures were in place that led to effective turnaround.

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations of this study included a focus on perceptions of central office staff and campus leaders from urban school districts in Texas. The study also focused solely on central office directors and executives and campus administrators, not teachers, students, or parents. Another delimitation was that the study focused on urban districts that had significantly increased student performance at turnaround schools instead of examining already high-performing districts. Delimitations for this study were purposeful because teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders would not have had a clear understanding of central office personnel, structures, or practices.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study were those commonly associated with case study research and other qualitative methodologies. One potential limitation was the narrow selection process used to identify school districts and participants in this study. Focusing on a single district and identifying select participants and campuses provided a limited perspective and may not lead to generalizability compared to other school districts. The fact that case studies are difficult to replicate and corroborate findings beyond the singular event studied presented another limitation (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, personal experiences and perspectives can unknowingly lead to bias and impact how a researcher collects and analyzes data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2018). However, the researcher has fully acknowledged the potential limitations of case study research and put several validity measures in place to offset any limitations. Validity

measures included triangulation methods, follow-up interviews, member checking, and peer debriefing protocols.

Definitions of Terms

Central office. Administrative personnel responsible for providing support or supervising campus leadership. Selected central office personnel did not physically report directly to any specific campus; they reported to school district administration offices.

Cabinet level. Central office personnel that belong to the superintendent's advisory cabinet. Cabinet members are defined as the director-level position or higher.

Organizational structures. District organizational charts and responsibilities assigned to central office personnel. For the purpose of this study, the term also refers to the supervisory role and the decision-making ability of central office personnel.

School turnaround. The process to achieve quick and dramatic gains in academic achievement for historically low-performing schools. Calkins et al. (2007) defined school turnaround as "a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that produces significant gain in student achievement within two academic years" (p. 69). For the purpose of this study, school turnaround was defined as campuses that quickly improved D or F letter grades to C or higher in consecutive years.

Turnaround school. Turnaround schools "experience years of chronic failure, resulting in a higher level of student need" (Kutash et al., 2010, p. 36). Turnaround schools undergo the turnaround process to quickly improve student achievement. Turnaround schools often experience reconstitution of staff, offer stipends for performance, and make changes to campus culture and physical environment.

Assumptions

The first assumption. The first assumption was that central office organizational structures have an impact on academic performance at the campus level.

The second assumption. The second assumption was that low-performing schools will continue to perform at low levels unless school districts respond by changing current organizational and structural practices.

The third assumption. The third assumption was that district participants will respond to interview questions objectively and truthfully.

The fourth assumption. The fourth assumption was that utilizing results from overall campus letter grades effectively identified districts that have systems and structures in place to turnaround low-performing schools.

The fifth assumption. School district leaders respond differently due to the increased pressure and transparency of an A-F accountability system.

The Significance of the Study

This study expanded on current research on the role central office staff has in improving learning outcomes for low-performing schools. If campus-level interventions were sufficient in turning around low-performing schools, schools would have done so long ago. Any real and sustainable school improvement effort requires a substantial district-level response. Although an abundance of research has been conducted that reveals what successful schools have done to quickly turnaround school performance, evidence of how districts intentionally structure support systems at the central office level to turnaround their lowest-performing schools remains limited. This study was also significant in that it was conducted in the largest state to adopt an A-F

accountability system, and the state continues to be one of the fastest growing in the country, notably with school-aged children and students of color. As pressure for failing schools to improve subpar letter grades has intensified, it is important to understand how increased accountability and demands to improve impact the perceptions and actions of district central office leadership and staff. The findings of this study can generate a template for large urban districts to consider when determining optimal structures and supports to rapidly increase and sustain academic performance at historically low-performing schools identified through Texas' high-stakes A-F accountability system.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study, identifying problems regarding school turnaround and the significance of examining a new accountability system with increased transparency and accountability to earn high letter grades. Additionally, this chapter provided context for the current state of school turnaround and included a conceptual framework for school improvement efforts at both the campus and central office level. This chapter also discussed implications of a new A-F accountability system and the significance of conducting this study. The next chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature that frames the conceptual framework encompassed in school turnaround.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Despite enacting policies intended to dramatically improve chronically low-performing schools, a large number of students still attend failing schools, especially in urban districts. In order to address the issue, many legislators "have called for swift and dramatic action to improve the nation's 5,000 lowest-performing schools, arguing that the magnitude of their dysfunction requires a robust response" (De le Torre, et al., 2013. p.1). Much of this response focused on the bottom five percent of schools in large, urban districts. Calkins et al. (2007) contended that, "Turning around the bottom five percent of schools is the crucible of education reform. They represent our greatest, clearest need- and therefore, a great opportunity to bring about fundamental change" (p.8). Although there has been a concerted effort to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools, most of these efforts have failed to lead to large-scale and sustained improvements, despite significant investments at the federal level.

The lowest-performing schools in urban school systems share strikingly similar characteristics. It is no secret that the vast majority of failing urban schools serve mostly poor, minority students. These schools are often staffed with ineffective leaders and teachers, plagued by high teacher turnover, and often have disruptive learning environments (Lester, 2018). As a result, achievement data has often demonstrated a strong correlation between poverty and the characteristics of chronically low-performing schools, a pattern that indicates that the failure is in the system. Calkins et al. (2008) found similar patterns in several states, "implying deep, systemic deficiencies rather than occasional management breakdown" (p. 26) in school systems. However, schools that overcame those barriers and have become high-performing, high-poverty schools also have similar practices and characteristics (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). Across the

nation, schools have gained a better understanding of those practices and are replicating them at their prospective campuses and districts. This review examined current literature on school turnaround practices and illuminated gaps in the literature regarding specific steps successful districts have taken at the central office level and obstacles they had to overcome to improve support structures, resulting in school improvement. This review also highlighted how increased accountability measures and transparency in the relatively new A-F reporting system applied increasing pressure and shortened the timeline for quick improvements in campus letter grade ratings.

Literature Review Overview

The literature review is organized in six strands. The initial strand reviews historical policies leading up to current high-stakes accountability and provides an overview of the evaluation of school accountability since the early 1980s. The second section reviews A-F accountability systems and their impact on school turnaround. The third section reviews federal guidelines and grants to support school turnaround. The fourth section examines Texas turnaround initiatives. The next section examines the historical perspective of school turnaround efforts, the qualities often found in chronically low-performing schools, and the practices that have helped schools turnaround the pattern of failure. The final section focuses on district practices that led to campus-level success with turnaround initiatives.

Policy Context and High Stakes Accountability

Modern school reform efforts began on August 26, 1981, when President Ronald Reagan commissioned his Secretary of Education T.H. Bell to create the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) in order to examine the overall quality of education in the

United States (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Eighteen months later, in April of 1983, the NCEE released its landmark report, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which castigated the American school system and called for fundamental reforms (Graham, 2013). The NCEE report appealed directly to the American conscience, painting a bleak picture of the state of public schools, reporting that there was often an "incoherent, outdated, patchwork quilt" of learning and low standards where "basic literacy has become the goal rather than the starting point" (p.15). A *Nation at Risk* led to sweeping reforms in public education by identifying an urgent need for states to develop rigorous and uniform standards and accountability measures.

As a result, in the 1990s, states and districts launched standards-based initiatives to develop a common core of academic standards that included a uniform curriculum, standardized assessments, and state accountability systems (Cortez & Duffy, 2003). These initiatives differed from traditional approaches in that they moved beyond compliance and regulations, shifting the focus to a continuous improvement cycle centered on improving student academic performance (Fuhrman, 1999). These trends continued, and in January 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, requiring a new level of standards-based educational reforms (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). NCLB mandated increased accountability, requiring states to set high academic standards and establish clear, measurable goals, including measuring Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for several different indicators. There were two key components of the NCLB legislation that were intended to have a direct impact on student performance at the lowest-performing schools. The first component required that states must

adopt a system that indicates how all students are making AYP over a 12-month period. The second component outlined how schools must adopt "a series of interventions" if they failed to meet AYP over time (Craciun & Snow-Renner, 2002, p.3). NCLB marked a significant change in policies, embracing the notion of improving outcomes for all students, despite economic background, race, or disability, while placing high levels of accountability on districts and schools.

In 2010, the Obama administration took bold action by investing over eight billion dollars in turnaround efforts, announcing the Race to the Top (RTTT) and School Improvement Grant (SIG) initiatives to provide incentives for school districts and educational leaders to dramatically improve low-performing schools (Kutash, et al., 2010). These grant awards generated models for success that could be replicated by schools in need, of which there are many. According to national statistics at the time, about 10% of school districts across the country were under sanctions because they failed to achieve AYP on state assessments (Kutash, et al., 2010). These initiatives opened the door for other innovative approaches to school reform. High-stakes accountability has led districts to consider innovative solutions and to address the challenges associated with low-performing schools, including turnaround models born from RTTT and SIG initiatives.

Reauthorization of NCLB. As the pendulum continues to swing in the direction of standardization and high-stakes accountability, changes are reflected in modifications to state and federal policies. In 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the provisions of NCLB, continuing critical safeguards for at-risk populations and requiring high academic standards for college and career readiness. A key

provision of ESSA was its focus on evidence-based practices and programs in an attempt to improve previous reform models that relied too heavily on unproven or poorly implemented reform practices (Lester, 2018). Although ESSA eliminated SIG programs, it required districts to allocate seven percent of Title I funds for school improvement purposes (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2016). ESSA also provided some flexibility for states in exchange for comprehensive plans that "close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, para. 3). ESSA scaled back key federal requirements and shifted much of the decision making back to the states. A few changes impacted overall state accountability systems and school interventions for low-performing schools. Four different indicators were required of accountability systems. Three of the four indicators included proficiency on state assessments, English language proficiency, and an additional component to analyze subgroups. The fourth indicator included a broader measure for school accountability, beyond school performance (Klein, 2015). ESSA also required states to identify schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement or targeted support and improvement. Schools identified in need of comprehensive support were the lowest-performing five percent of schools in the state and were required to develop improvement plans that include parent participation and identifying any inequitable practices with resource allocation (ASCD, 2016).

A-F Accountability Policy. The debate about high-stakes accountability systems, common core curriculum, and standardized assessments has arguably never been more divisive. From the Common Core State Standards movement that gained national attention and opposition, to the A-F accountability systems where states assign schools and districts letter

grades based on performance on standardized assessments, the battle for how schools are held accountable for student performance has become increasingly political and volatile. Proponents of A-F systems argue that increased transparency and simplified school performance reports encourage community and parent engagement, allowing parents to be involved in school choices (Dalton, 2017; Murray & Howe, 2017; Tanner, 2016). Critics of A-F accountability systems argue that the system creates a rewards and punishment system that supports a market accountability approach, where parents and students leave schools with failing grades, taking funding with them, further perpetuating the cycle of failure (Murray & Howe, 2017). Critics further argue that the process is "neither transparent or simple" and "misrepresents a large proportion of what happens in schools by reducing an entire school to a single mark" (Tanner, 2016, p. 2).

By 2017, sixteen states across the country adopted some version of A-F report card accountability systems that assign letter grades to schools (Murray & Howe, 2017). The A-F evaluation system attempts to make schools more accountable for improving student outcomes for all students by creating a simplified system that was easy to understand and interpret (Adams et al., 2016). During the 85th Legislature, Texas followed suit with the passage of House Bill 22 (HB 22) where districts and schools would receive A-F ratings in overall performance and in three domains: student achievement, student progress, and closing achievement gaps (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Texas' A-F system went into effect during the 2017-2018 school year, and districts received an overall district grade, with individual campuses receiving letter grades the following year. All 1,200 school districts and over 8,300 individual schools received A-F letter grades for the first time in 2019 (TEA, 2019).

On August 15, 2019, the state released official school ratings for the first time. Although there was an overall increase in performance compared to the previous year, there were still 27 public school districts and 990 public schools that received an overall rating of D or F (TEA, 2019). This represented approximately twelve percent of all public schools in the state. Although the accountability system takes into account the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, most Ds and Fs were assigned to schools and districts with economically disadvantaged rates that were higher than state averages (Swaby & Cai, 2019). Schools that received overall D or F ratings, or ratings of D in any domain, are required by TEA to create Targeted Improvement Plans (TIP) which outline specific interventions and monitoring systems campuses will implement to improve student academic performance. Campuses are also required to hold a public meeting to share what plans are in place to quickly improve academic performance (TEA, 2019).

School performance reports and report cards are increasingly made available online in fixed or interactive formats, which provide families information about school choices. The easy access, combined with the simplified format and increased transparency has also increased the sense of urgency for schools to earn higher letter grades. Dalton stated, "School rating systems are influential with school and district administrators, who pay close attention to public perception, and with parents, who use them as a guide for residential location and enrollment decisions" (2017, p. 16). As families consider schooling choices, while many urban school systems are experiencing declining enrollment, districts continue to respond to the pressures of raising letter grades in order to retain and recruit families to their schools.

School Turnaround Literature

One significant concept that emerged in this school reform movement was the idea of turnaround schools created during the Obama administration. The next section highlights the development of school turnaround, including how that idea has transcended to all states, including Texas. The Obama administration invested heavily in school reform efforts by adopting the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which included an unprecedented investment in school reform and reshaped federal policy and turnaround initiatives. This policy change provided state-level funding guidelines for turnaround strategies (Honig et al., 2010). ARRA provided funding for three distinct categories for states and local educational agencies (LEAs): Race to the Top (RTTT), School Improvement Grants (SIG), and Investing in Innovation Fund. All funding structures provided grant opportunities for states with the sole focus of school turnaround. To qualify for RTTT or SIG grants, states were required to adopt one of four models.

In the first model, called the turnaround model, the campus principal is replaced, and no more than 50% of staff is rehired. A new governance structure was required and ongoing professional development would be embedded into the new structures (DOE, 2015). All staff would receive financial incentives and/or opportunities for career advancement. Campuses were required to implement research-based instructional models, offer an extended school day for students, and provide additional planning time for teachers (Kutash et al., 2010). Twenty percent of the schools that participated in SIG chose to implement the turnaround model (Estrada, et al., 2014).

The second model was the restart model, which transferred control of the school to a school operator, selected through a rigorous screening process. All restarts must allow any former students to return if the campus offered the same grade levels (DOE, 2015). When school districts transfer control, they often transfer control to charter operators (Kutash et al., 2010). Four percent of schools that received SIG grants chose the restart model (Estrada et al., 2014).

The third model was the transformation model which required the replacement of the campus principal, with no requirements to replace staff. This model required job-embedded professional development, rigorous teacher evaluation and reward system, and financial or career incentives (DOE, 2015). In addition, the transformation model required comprehensive instructional reforms, extended learning opportunities, extended teacher preparation time, and a community-centered orientation (Kutash et al., 2010). The transformation model was often considered the least disruptive because the staff may remain (Kutash et al., 2010). Of the schools that applied for SIG grants, seventy-four percent adopted the transformation model (Estrada et al., 2014).

The fourth model was the school closure model, where the school is closed, and students are enrolled in higher-performing schools (Kutash et al., 2010). Kutash et al. (2010) contended that, "School closures, for many community stakeholders, signal that the district has given up on that school's staff, students, families, and community, and causes students to transfer and travel to new schools" (p. 24). The closure model was the least adopted model within the SIG framework with only two percent of 843 participating schools pursuing this model (Estrada et al., 2014).

Texas Turnaround Model

Modern school reform in Texas began in 2009 with the authorization of the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) by the Texas Legislature. TCDSS supervised the Texas Title I Priority Schools Grant Program, which was the state's version of the federal SIG program (Le Floch, 2015). Working closely with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to support Texas Accountability and Intervention System (TAIS), TCDSS supported schools and districts with improvement efforts. The TAIS model included a clear framework of critical success criteria, support systems, and clear commitments from districts (Le Floch, 2015). The TAIS model was fully implemented in 2014, in an effort to transform and sustain accelerated achievement in the lowest-performing schools. According to TEA (2016), the TAIS process:

> ...provides school districts with clearly articulated commitments and support systems needed to engage in thoughtful and holistic school improvement and was developed through synthesizing decades of school improvement research to identify critical success factors and a cycle of continuous improvement that, when fully implemented, results in accelerated achievement (p.1).

Although the TAIS model created a framework to improve overall practices at underperforming schools, it also included a series of sanctions for schools that did not meet minimum accountability targets. Schools that failed to meet accountability measures were identified with the label Improvement Required (IR). IR campuses were required to conduct a root cause analysis and develop targeted intervention plans to address deficiencies and improve the overall academic performance of their campuses. There were stark consequences for IR campuses if they did not meet academic targets for consecutive years, including reconstitution or

closure by the state if they did not make adequate gains for five consecutive years. In 2018, there were 344 Texas schools that were identified in the state accountability system as IR campuses (TEA, 2018).

Beginning the 2019-2020 school year, TEA transitioned from the TAIS model to the Effective Schools Framework (ESF). Similar to the TAIS model, the ESF follows a continuous improvement process, with the goal of providing a clear path for an excellent education for all students in the state, and especially those in historically underperforming schools and districts. A fundamental component of ESF is a diagnostic process that allows districts to align resources and supports according to identified needs of individual schools (TEA, 2019). TEA reported the following:

> At the core of effective schools is effective instruction: interactions between students, teachers, and content determine learning outcomes. This instructional core is strengthened and supported by effective, well-supported teachers, high-quality curriculum, and positive school culture. Strong school leadership and careful planning encompass and ensure each of these prioritized levers (2019, para. 2).

The ESF framework has also included commitments from the district to ensure campuses have the structures and resources in place to support a sustained improvement model. The ESF district commitments included the following:

- The district places its most effective school leaders in its highest need schools.
- The district recognizes the unique needs of low-performing schools and provides the flexibility to address those needs.

- The district provides opportunities for ongoing support and coaching of the campus leader.
- The district provides the campus with adequate funding and sufficient control over its budget to ensure access to necessary resources for implementation of the school's improvement plan and high-quality instruction to meet student learning needs.
- The district supports principals by protecting their time dedicated for school instructional leadership.
- The district ensures that principal supervisors have necessary authority to create conditions for school success (e.g., remove barriers).
- The district policies and practices prioritize principal and principal supervisor instructional leadership (e.g., manageable span of control, time dedicated to instructional practices).
- The district provides effective governance to support and promote student outcomes (TEA, 2019, p. 2).

A District Coordinator of School Improvement (DCSI) is responsible for identifying which district commitments were required to support school improvement efforts. The DCSI works with campus leadership and district support personnel to prioritize which essential actions will have the greatest impact on the continuous improvement cycle. In the ESF model, the DCSI is the intermediary between the campus and the district and is responsible for identifying "which commitments the district-level stakeholders need to be involved in determining the district commitments to prioritize" (TEA, 2019, p. 10).

Texas Education Code and Strategic Planning

Strategic planning and decision-making practices have been fundamental to school improvement reforms. Texas Education Code §11.252 (1995) required districts to develop district improvement plans which must be evaluated and recorded each year. The code stated, "The purpose of the district improvement plans is to guide district and campus staff in the improvement of student performance for all student groups in order to attain state standards in respect to achievement indicators" (Texas Education Code, 1995). Not only were districts required to develop improvement plans, campuses were also charged with developing improvement plans at the campus level, often working in site-based decision-making teams. The basic premise behind site-based decision making was that those responsible for implementing improvement practices should be involved in developing the plan. TEA defined site-based decision making as:

> Site-based decision making is a process for decentralizing decisions to improve the educational outcomes at every school campus through a collaborative effort by which principals, teachers, campus staff, district staff, parents, and community representatives assess educational outcomes of all students, determine goals and strategies, and ensure that strategies are implemented and adjusted to improve student achievement (TEA, 2010, p. 2).

Identifying needs, developing goals, and implementing strategies have been common practices in the school improvement planning process at both district and campus levels. Schools and districts have followed a common planning framework, which included conducting a comprehensive needs assessment to identify root causes and deficiencies, developing

performance objectives, implementing strategies for improvement, and establishing formative monitoring systems to evaluate progress of the strategies under each performance objective (TEA, 2019). The planning framework has been consistent with other planning and decision-making guidelines which help organizations effectively identify needs and develop comprehensive and collaborative plans to address those needs. Effective decision-making and planning models have followed a similar seven-step decision-making process. The seven components of the decision-making process include the following:

1. Determine that a decision needs to be made based on opportunities and needs.
2. Diagnose the problem by collecting and analyzing information.
3. Consider alternatives to address the impact of decisions on the organization.
4. Weigh the evidence and prioritize alternatives.
5. Evaluate alternatives and develop a plan.
6. Develop an action plan to address needs.
7. Review decisions and determine if the plan adequately addresses needs by analyzing results (UMASS Dartmouth, 2020).

School and district improvement planning and decision-making models have served as a guide for those responsible for improving student performance at the school and district levels. A systematic decision-making and planning process provides stakeholders a method to monitor and respond to progress or lack of progress in a timely manner. However, according to a report produced by the Hanover Research Group (2014), "research suggests that school districts often fall short of this active improvement process when designing and implementing their own plans." (p. 5). The keyword in this quote is "active" which highlights not only the importance of

developing coherent, data-based plans that address root causes of failure, but that plans must also be regularly monitored and assessed to ensure short-term goals have been met. It is also important to note that plans are dynamic and are malleable based on student performance data and evolving needs of the campus.

School Level Turnaround Research

Despite patterns of low achievement from students with disadvantaged backgrounds, there are schools across the nation that beat the odds where those same disadvantaged students achieve high levels of academic success. Multiple studies have shown that not only is it possible, but by identifying key levers and practices, it has been replicable. Consistent campus-based practices found in the literature include selecting a highly effective leader and teachers, establishing a culture of high expectations for all students, utilizing data to drive the decision-making process, providing visible improvements, and building teacher capacity (Estrada et al., 2014; Le Floch, 2014; Herman et al., 2009; Kutash et al., 2010; Reeves, 2009). The following sections examine what common practices have proved to be effective in leading to school turnaround at the school level.

Campus Leadership. Research has proven that strong school leadership is vital to school turnaround. According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004), "There are virtually no documented cases of school turnaround absent a strong leader " (p.5). Over fifteen years later, this still holds true. As more research has been conducted, researchers continue to identify the correlations between effective school leaders and improved student achievement. Empirical evidence has pinpointed what specific actions campus leaders may take to improve student performance. Darling-Hammond has contended that besides the quality of

the classroom teacher, school leaders were the second most important variable when predicting student achievement (Honig et al., 2010). One Texas study found a .21 standard deviation in assessment scores between effective and ineffective principals, which translated to an increase of 16 percentage points in student achievement annually (Le Floch, 2015). According to Darling-Hammond, "...it is the leader who both recruits and retains high-quality staff — indeed, the number one reason for teachers' decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support — and it is the leader who must develop this organization" (DeVita et al., 2007, p. 17). This may be particularly important considering that a common characteristic of turnaround schools, where turnover rates for teachers and principals in low-socioeconomic, low-performing schools has been 50% higher than non-Title I schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Leading improvement efforts at the building level, campus principals are in a position to have a direct impact on the teaching and learning in classrooms (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). By building a common vision, setting clear goals, and aligning campus-based practices, school leaders are able to distribute leadership throughout the campus and align practices with priorities (Herman et al., 2008; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Murphy, 2009; Rhim et al., 2007). According to Reeves (2009), sustainable change begins with shared values and commitment to improvement efforts. However, leading transformational change does not end with identifying a strong principal to lead turnaround efforts. Any effective school leader is only as good as his or her team. Research has highlighted the importance of developing a cohesive leadership team that shares values and commitment to turnaround practices (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018; DuFour, 2005; Reeves, 2009). In describing the importance of

developing a coherent leadership team, Bambrick-Santoyo (2018) stated, “Get everyone in the right place at the right time, and together you can scale incredible distances in even the most challenging conditions. It’s a lot easier to fly with a team than on your own.” (p.309).

Strategic Staffing and Building Teacher Capacity. While it is important to select quality campus principals to lead school turnaround efforts, the evidence supporting the crucial role of teachers has been undeniable. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), “Among in-school factors, teachers have the greatest direct impact on student achievement” (p. 34). One study found that over the course of one academic year, “the top third of teachers produced as much as six times the learning growth” compared to the bottom third (Sparks, 2004, p. 46). The importance of educator effectiveness was even more pronounced at low-performing turnaround schools, where evidence showed that the most effective teachers work at a proportionally higher rate at more affluent schools (Baroody, 2011; Hahnel & Jackson, 2012; Sass, Hannaway, Figlio, & Feng, 2012). To address the inequalities surrounding teacher effectiveness at the lowest-performing turnaround schools, studies have focused on strategic staffing practices and human capital. Practices included placing the strongest teachers in core classrooms and building teacher capacity. Le Floch (2015) pointed out two primary paths for schools to build teacher capacity: (1) attract, hire, and retain the best teachers, while removing ineffective teachers, and (2) increase the knowledge and skills of teachers with intentional professional development practices.

Common practices to build teacher capacity at turnaround schools included establishing professional learning communities, implementing walkthrough and coaching models, and developing a school-wide professional development plan which focused on high-leverage

instructional strategies. An enhanced understanding of professional development emphasized the concept of collective capacity, where staff receive job-embedded coaching while working in collaboration with other teachers (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) asserted that, "The best professional development occurred in the context of the workplace rather than the workshop as teachers work together to address the issues and challenges that are relevant to them" (p. 20). Key features of best practices for professional development included a strong focus on curricular content, active learning opportunities, i.e., classroom observations, analyzing student work, etc., and consistency with reform practices over time (Le Floch, 2015). Challenging a traditional approach to teacher development, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) foster conditions where teachers work together to develop the knowledge and skills required to achieve team and campus goals (DuFour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005). Bambrick-Santoyo's Weekly Data Meeting (WDM) model has leveraged a collaborative planning process to build teacher content knowledge as well as pedagogical practices by providing time to unpack standards, develop reteach lessons, and perhaps most importantly, time to practice and perfect the reteach before going live with students (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018).

Mission, Vision, and Visible Improvements. Another key lever for improvement at turnaround campuses has been setting a clear vision, celebrating visible improvements and early wins, and having a strong collective belief that turnaround is not only possible, but probable, if the right people and resources are in place. In persistently low-performing schools, there has been a common belief that the low-academic performance was inevitable and impossible to turn around (DeVita et al., 2007; Rihm, 2007). Analyzing case study research, Herman et al. (2008) found that, "building a committed staff was essential, with everyone with the same mindset" (p.

27) when describing the importance of cohesion in instructional expectations and improving student performance at low-performing schools. Any substantial and long-term change required more than changes in structural systems, programs, or practices. In order to become the norm throughout any organization, the change required a complete transformation in beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and ultimately habits (DuFour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005). Change can only be realized when there was a shared vision of what the school can become or a coherent system of how the school will function when the beliefs and habits have become practice (Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004). One way to help staff see the possibilities of high levels of student achievement has been to identify quick wins or visible improvements. Case studies have shown how campuses made significant gains by focusing on one or two short term goals, and how reaching those goals sent a quick message to staff that improvements are possible (Herman et al., 2008).

Data-Driven Instruction. Another consistent finding in studies on school turnaround was the laser-like focus on data practices to inform decision making. Studies have shown that schools that dramatically improve student outcomes regularly collect student data, analyze data, review data in collaborative teams, and develop instructional plans in response to the data (Le Floch, 2015). Effective data collection requires a variety of data sources to ensure an accurate diagnosis of student learning needs. In a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education, Hamilton et al. (2009) identified the following five evidence-based recommendations to leverage data practices in classrooms: (1) make data an ongoing cycle for instructional improvement, (2) teach students to examine their own data and set goals, (3) establish a clear vision for school-wide data use, (4) provide supports for a data-driven culture within the school, and (5)

develop and maintain a district-wide data system. These recommendations have been substantiated in other studies as well. In a study examining school turnaround in middle schools in New York City, Villavicencio and Grayman (2012) found that, "teachers and principals used frequent assessments (both standardized and teacher-created) to identify students' strengths and weaknesses" (p. 47) when describing successful practices found in turnaround schools. Studying data practices in three Broad Prize winning school districts, Zavadsky (2009) found commonalities that supported the use of frequent student performance measures with formative and summative assessments. Studies also found that schools with effective data practices included diagnostic and monitoring tools that provide frequent feedback at all levels (Kowalski, 2008).

Although data-driven decision making has been a buzzword in education circles since the early 1990s, some have argued that data practices at many schools, including turnaround schools, have remained at the surface or superficial level, leading to minimal impact on student achievement. In an article examining the micro-process research on data use, Little (2012) found that the strict use of data protocols and teacher collaboration were vital to effective campus-level data practices, where teachers allocated time to review student work, consider instructional implications, and develop plans in response to the data. By examining studies through a micro-process lens, she suggested using a strategy of "zooming in" to glean a deeper understanding of the practices as teachers and administrators interpret data and respond to data (Little, 2012). Bambrick-Santoyo's work on leading effective data-driven instructional practices highlighted the importance of aligning systems to assess, evaluate, and to develop action plans to respond to the data (2018). His WDM model has redefined traditional data-driven protocols by

not only clearly identifying student misconceptions after close examination of student work, but also by developing and practicing a reteach plan during the meeting. According to Bambrick-Santoyo (2018), "Data meetings shift the focus from observing one percent of the learning to 80 percent. That makes all the difference" (p. 59). By implementing the simple principles of data-driven instruction to meet the needs of students, he cited success stories from across the globe, including Blanton Elementary School in Dallas ISD, where a thirty to forty percent increase in STAAR reading and math scores over a three year period were achieved (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018).

Extended Learning Time. Another proven practice that has shown positive results in improving academic achievement at historically low-performing schools has been to develop a schedule that provides additional class time in core content areas. Although it is not the cure-all, providing additional instructional time, whether extended day or school year, has improved performance at turnaround campuses (Calkins et al., 2007). Several studies have highlighted the value of providing additional learning time to improve math and literacy results in low-performing schools (Corry & Carlson, 2014; Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Smith, Rodrick, & Degener, 2005).

District-Level Turnaround Research

Since the standards-based and high-stakes accountability movement began in the early 1990s, there has been a void in understanding the complexities of the impact district-level initiatives have on improvement efforts at the school level. Until relatively recently, the vast majority of research has focused on campus-level change initiatives and their impact on student accountability. Many scholars have dismissed district-level reforms, arguing that reform efforts

should be anchored at the school level to impact real and sustainable change (Rorrer et al., 2008). This sentiment has begun to change as studies have highlighted the importance of districts as institutional actors that have proven to effectively initiate school improvement through systemic reforms. According to Mac Iver and Farley (2003), "In the face of all this anti-district and anti-central office rhetoric, it is important to recognize the growing number of scholars who are emphasizing the importance of the district in school reform efforts and the research base that examines the role of the central office" (p. 2). To illustrate this point, Meyers and Smylie (2017) observed that "lasting school-level improvement needs to be initiated or sparked or championed by district leadership" (p. 519).

Recent studies have provided an alternative to the common narrative that the answer to improved student performance was in decentralization and removing the bureaucratic obstacles associated with centralized educational systems. An increasing number of case studies have examined the daily practices and systems in place in central offices and their impact on school improvement. In a study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, Honig et al. (2010) examined how districts transformed the central office into a support system for school improvement. Moving away from the site-based management movement, which was intended to minimize school system bureaucracies and provide more autonomy to campuses and school-based leadership teams, school district leadership has "re-emerged" with high-stakes accountability and responsibilities associated with federal and state legislatures (Leithwood, 2010). A growing body of research has begun to shine a light on the systemic reforms taking place across the country that highlight commonality in district practices and systems that have provided evidence that real reforms have been taking place at the district level. While the

literature examining the role of principals and school leaders in turnaround has been vast, the implications for district offices are lesser known. According to the literature, the following key practices implemented at the district level seem to support sustainable turnaround at the school level.

Strategic Staffing and Restructuring. Leading school turnaround at the lowest-performing schools requires a team of highly effective educators. Meyers and Smylie (2017) noted that, "research is clear that schools in the most need for the best principals and teachers have the most difficulty getting and retaining them" (p. 519). More and more districts across the country are developing systems and practices to staff their schools according to needs. This begins with districts placing their most successful principals at their most academically low-performing schools. However, research has emerged that notes that having a strong campus principal is not enough. Turnaround campuses have also required strong leadership teams, so districts should carefully consider how to staff assistant principal positions and other key campus leadership positions with individuals with the greatest potential to be successful school leaders (Baroody, 2011). In Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Strategic Staffing Initiative, principals with proven track records that were assigned to high-need campuses could choose five high-performing teachers from any school across the district to join their team (Johnson et al., 2015).

Studies have shown that districts typically do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without significant engagement with central office. Johnson et al. (2015) have highlighted the importance of districts aligning strategic staffing practices at all levels, including central office staff, with improvement goals in order to effectively support quality teaching and learning on campuses. In a national study on how urban school districts redefined

the role of central office to build relationships between schools and improve teaching and learning, Honig et al. (2010) identified three activities involved in "reorganizing and reculturating" central office positions to support improvements in teaching and learning:

1. Shifting the practice of central office administrators across central office units to personalize services through "case management" and focus on problem solving through "project management."
2. Developing the capacity of people throughout the central office to support teaching and learning improvement.
3. Holding central office administrators accountable for high-quality performance, especially as it relates to the quality of support provided to school leaders (p. 23).

This shift in how the district managed its work at the central office required restaffing and retraining to ensure positions were filled with people who knew how to and were able to appropriately support improvements at the campus level (Honig et al., 2010).

Ensuring a Quality Curriculum. Having strong leaders in our schools, though, is not enough. Research has shown that school systems also need clear academic standards that definitively outline expectations for what school leaders need to do in order to hold them accountable for results (DeVita et al., 2007). To address the fact that low-performing schools often have low-quality curriculum, it is essential that districts carefully evaluate their curriculum and curricular resources to ensure strong levels of alignment with state standards and evaluation systems. Considering other factors often associated with historically low-performing schools, i.e., low teacher effectiveness, inadequate instructional materials, etc., it is the district's responsibility to ensure that turnaround campuses have a strong curriculum (DeVita et al., 2007).

Research is beginning to highlight the importance of strengthening curriculum by focusing on fewer standards, reasoning and inquiry skills, and how to apply knowledge instead of merely covering content (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In one study of five large urban districts that have demonstrated high-levels of improvement in student achievement, Johnson et al. (2015) found a strong coherence in curriculum and instructional uniformity. Three out of the five districts adhered to a centralized approach and developed an academic program based on the following "if-then" relationship: If the district can use its resources and expertise to adopt or develop high-quality curriculum, provide excellent professional development, and monitor the curriclum's instruction, then all students will learn" (p.45). Schmoker (2018) has gone as far and has stated that, "Coherent, content-rich curriculum isn't just important: it is indisputably essential to the educational enterprise, to all we aspire to accomplish for students" (p.22). In one comprehensive review of 31 studies, Leithwood (2010) observed that high-performing districts not only had a district-wide curriculum, but they often mandated specific high-yield instructional approaches. He further noted that high-performing districts have an aligned professional development system and an "uncontested focus" on student achievement and improved instruction (p. 272).

Adjusted Resource Allocations. To address the varying needs of their campuses, some districts that have shown the most improvements in turning around schools have adopted adjusted student funding formulas to meet the unique needs of their most at-risk campuses. Baltimore's "fair student funding" and Charlotte-Mecklenburg's "weighted student funding" formulas provided some schools additional resources to address the high needs of their students (Johnson et al., 2015). A Massachusetts study examined how one district transformed its system

and allocated resources to meet student and teacher needs. The study found that by allocating additional resources to struggling schools and adding 200 to 300 additional instructional hours, providing additional training and planning time for teachers, and creating partnerships for after school enrichment, schools experienced double-digit gains in overall proficiency in math (Baroody, Rho, & Huberlie 2015).

Coherence Between Central Office and Campuses. The decades-long debate around centralizing and decentralizing school systems is rooted in the idea that there is often a disconnect between the work taking place in school administration buildings and school buildings. Recent research on the merits of the effectiveness of centralization or decentralization have been inconclusive because there are large urban school districts across the nation that are thriving in both models (Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009). Those same studies, and others, highlighted the importance of having strong coherence between central offices and campuses, bridging the gap between those two worlds. Achieving coherence with strategic priorities and organizational elements in large urban districts is challenging and complex. However, districts achieving high levels of coherence and academic improvements have created intermediary roles that coordinate work with schools. Although these positions had different titles, i.e, area superintendents, executive directors, network specialists, "they were expected to broker, facilitate, or monitor the activities that were of greatest importance to both the central office and schools" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 67).

A study that identified three transforming urban systems magnified the importance of transformation efforts that involved creating strong relationships between intermediary central office administrators, or Instructional Leadership Directors (ILD) and campus principals while

developing principals into strong instructional leaders (Honig et al., 2010). The ILDs coordinated work between central office and campuses by developing strong partnerships in carrying out the following intentional activities:

- Providing professional development to the ILDs that engaged them in ongoing challenging conversations about their work with principals and how to strengthen it.
- Taking issues off the ILDs' plates that interfered with efforts to focus their work with principals in instructional leadership. For example, in one district, other central office administrators blocked off two and a half days each week when neither the ILDs nor school principals would be pulled into any meetings or other activities away from their learning-focused partnerships.
- Others in the central office leading through, not over or around, the ILDs, in ways that reinforced the centrality of the ILD-principal relationships and reinforced the importance of ILD leadership to the overall teaching and learning improvement effort.
- The system, not solely the ILDs, holding principals accountable for improving schools' performance on annual performance measures. When the rest of the central office did not provide these supports, the ILDs found their time consumed by complying with evaluation activities rather than providing support to principals focused on instructional leadership (Honig et al., 2010, p. vii).

The strong partnerships between principals, intermediary personnel, and other central office staff has been essential to developing strong coherence between campuses and central

offices. To better align systems to support district initiatives, including school improvement efforts, required a shift in what the work looked like at the highest levels.

Evidence-Based Decision Making. Another important trend that emerged from the literature regarding district-level factors that lead to improved academic outcomes is the reliance of evidence-based decision making. This included a wide range of considerations, including how to respond to current practices and programs, whether or not to adopt or eliminate a program, provide additional support to campuses, or to reallocate central office personnel (DeVita et al., 2007; Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2016; Zavadsky, 2009). In Norfolk Public Schools, programs were eliminated if there was no evidence of them having positive effects on student learning, regardless of whether or not staff members liked the program (Zavadsky, 2009). In addition to regularly using standardized assessment results, Honig et al. (2010) found that central office administrators routinely examined evidence from campus principals and other central office administrators before making decisions. Darling-Hammond (2010) contended that decisions should be made "on the basis of the best available professional knowledge" and moving beyond "procedure-oriented and rule-based" practice to create practices that are "client-oriented and knowledge-based" (p. 302). She argued for a high-level of professional accountability, where decisions are based on best practices. Districts that have effectively transformed their central offices worked diligently to collect evidence about their transformation in order to continue to hone and improve their work.

Discussion and Implications

If schools had the capacity, staff, and resources for successful turnaround, most would have improved long ago. Durable school turnaround initiatives require district-level systemic

reforms. Important evidence emerged from the literature that illuminates the essential role central office personnel, systems, practices, and organizational structures play in improving teaching and learning at the campus level. Continuous improvements in academic performance not only depend on these structures and systems, but they also hinge on the daily practices of those at the top of the organization and intentional campus-central office interactions that positively impact teaching and learning. There is abundant literature that has revealed what successful schools have done to quickly turnaround school performance. However, evidence of how districts purposefully structure support systems at the central office level to turnaround their lowest-performing schools is limited. Since school systems have implemented different variations of school turnaround models, and because much of that research has focused on campus interventions, there is a further need and value in studying central office practices (De le Torre et al., 2013). There is a growing body of research (Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009) that has begun to examine the role central offices play in improving student performance, but many of those studies have not fully illuminated the specific structures and day-to-day practices that lead to wide-scale improvements at the campus level.

Although urban districts face similar challenges in turning around their lowest-performing schools, each state follows a different accountability system, with its own unique challenges, and many of these studies were conducted in large urban districts outside of Texas. Texas is the second most populous state with approximately 5,431,910 students attending public schools (TEA, 2019). Texas is also the seventh fastest-growing state, with almost a 17 percent increase since 2010 (World Population Review, 2020). This is particularly relevant considering that roughly 29 percent of Texas' overall population is under 20 years of age, which

is well above national averages (Social Explorer, 2018). As school-age populations continue to increase, and the vast majority of these students will attend large public school districts, Texas school districts are uniquely positioned to impact school turnaround trends at a national level.

Considering that the 2019-2020 school year marked only the second year of Texas' A-F school accountability system, there are gaps in the literature on how the new system has impacted school turnaround efforts at the central office level due to the short timeframe of implementation. As the seventeenth state to implement a school rating system that assigns letter grades, Texas is the largest state to adopt a system that assigns a single letter grade to its schools. Well before the A-F rating system, there was already significant pressure for school districts to turnaround their lowest-performing schools. The increased transparency and simple evaluation metric of A-F has only intensified that pressure. Perceptions abound that A and B-rated campuses are good schools and that D and F campuses are bad schools. As these influences continue to mount, especially for those schools and districts that earn D and F ratings, it is important to understand how those influences impact the perceptions, responses, and actions of district central office leadership and staff. Although there is research that identifies campus and district practices that have led to improved academic performance at historically low-performing schools, more research is needed to understand how central offices have specifically taken action to respond to the increased pressures of a more transparent system. More research in this crucial area is essential to better understand how increased transparency and public accountability of A-F rating systems impact the work of those at the top of the school system in changing the course for failing schools.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The 2018-2019 school year marked the second year of Texas' A-F rating system, the first year where individual schools received letter grades, and the second year districts received overall letter grades based on student performance. With the increased transparency and accountability of a single letter grade system used to represent a school's overall effectiveness, school and district leaders are under increased pressure to quickly improve campus and district performance as represented by those letter grades or face harsh consequences, especially failing schools that struggle to improve (Dalton, 2017; Murray & Howe, 2017; Tanner, 2016). Other factors, such as declining enrollment, have magnified that pressure, as families consider other schooling options if their community schools earn subpar to failing letter grades. This study examined school turnaround practices that have been implemented in one Texas school district that quickly increased academic improvement and resulted in improved letter grades. This study expanded current research on the role that central office staff have in improving letter grades at their respective low-performing schools. The findings of this study may be used as a starting point for creating a template for large urban districts to consider when determining structures and support systems that have been proven to rapidly increase academic performance at low-performing D or F schools identified through Texas' high-stakes A-F accountability system. This chapter describes the methodology and procedures for this study, and it includes five sections that detail the purpose of the study, the research questions, district and participant selection, the study design, and the data collection process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the organizational structures and support systems that school and district leaders perceive to have the greatest impact on turnaround efforts and sustained academic achievement in an A-F accountability system. The pressure to improve student outcomes in a state system that assigns letter grades to schools and districts can provide opportunities for district leaders to look inward to restructure the organization and reallocate resources, leading to academic improvement. This is especially true in Texas, where the state is uniquely positioned to be a national leader in school reform as it is the largest state in the country to adopt an A-F accountability system, and it has one of the fastest growing demographics for school-age children. This study analyzed how one urban school district structured and reallocated resources to transform its lowest-performing schools using models that could be adapted and implemented for reforming other schools in need.

Research Questions

As identified in the conceptual framework, this study was conducted on the hypothesis that organizational structures and systems have a positive impact on school turnaround and creating sustainable improvements in academic performance. This qualitative study evaluated perceptions from school and district leaders about the specific district-level structures and practices that were believed to have led to successful school turnaround and improved letter grades. Using a phenomenological approach, this study sought to understand the perceptions and perspectives of participants' lived experiences of school turnaround efforts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). The study addressed the following questions:

1. What role do cabinet-level administrators and district directors play in improving and sustaining overall campus letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
2. What systems and structures were created at the cabinet or director level to improve and sustain overall letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
3. What barriers were removed to facilitate academic improvement across the district?

Theoretical Position

Epistemology refers to perspective or worldview, a guide for interpreting and explaining reality (Crotty, 1998). An epistemological lens considers the nature and the origin of how the world is perceived and how that perception influences the interpretation of incoming information (Crotty, 1998; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Maxwell, 2012). According to Crotty (1998), "Meaning is not discovered, but constructed" and "different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon." (p.9). Interpretivism is an epistemological orientation that truth and knowledge are based on lived experiences (Crotty, 1998). With this in mind, it has been theoretically acknowledged that an "interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants" (Goldkuhl, 2012, p. 24). In research studies, an epistemological, interpretivist approach focuses on a participant's point of view in order to explain why a certain phenomena has occurred. This case study is deeply rooted in interpretivism, which attempts to explain and understand complex human and social realities (Crotty, 1998). This researcher acknowledges that all research participants come with their own sets of beliefs, unique perspectives, cultures, and experiences. In order to glean a clearer understanding of a particular phenomenon, it is vital the researcher does not pursue specific answers to studies through a rigid process but rather accept and pursue multiple

perspectives through a holistic and participatory approach (Goldkuhl, 2012). Interpretivism as a theoretical framework provides a foundation for a range of understanding and the varied responses of participants.

Case Study Research Design

This study relied on qualitative methodology, utilizing a single case study design approach. Qualitative research involves interpreting events by identifying variables and explaining the relationship of those variables statistically (Maxwell, 2012). The following sections outline the research design, provide a rationale for choosing the design, and list a step-by-step process used during the study. Leedy and Ormrod contended that case study designs allow the researcher to conduct an in-depth study of a particular group or organization because its "unique or exceptional qualities can promote understanding or inform practice of similar situations" (2016, p. 252). According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), qualitative data "can preserve chronological flow, see which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (p. 4). A case study approach was selected in order to gain a better understanding of what practices and conditions were in place that led to effective turnaround as compared to similar districts that have not experienced the same levels of effectiveness. A case study design provides a process to examine complex social components to help understand a given phenomenon (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Yin (2018) defined case study in two parts, describing them as:

1. "An empirical method that:
    - investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-world context, especially when

- the boundaries between context may not be clearly evident

2. A case study:
    - copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
    - benefits of prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis, and as another result
    - relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion" (p. 15).

This case study is divided into three parts in order to collect and triangulate qualitative data. Part one of this study included conducting in-person or video conferencing, semi-structured interviews with campus and district leaders involved in the turnaround efforts that resulted in improvements in overall campus letter grades. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants determined whether or not interviews were conducted in person or through video conferencing. The second part consisted of a review of school improvement documents, organization charts, and other artifacts related to school and district turnaround practices. The third section involved a second interview to ask clarifying or follow-up questions to provide clarity.

Site and Participant Selection

This study relied on a purposeful selection process that deliberately identified an urban school district that yielded extraordinary results when compared to similar districts to illuminate the differences in structures and practices. Turnaround campuses for this study were defined as campuses that improved D or F ratings to a C or higher and maintained the improved letter grade

the following year. This study examined a large urban school district with a population of over 40,000 students, where campuses experienced quick and sustained turnaround success in Texas' A-F accountability system. The district was identified based on the number of D or F campuses that advanced and maintained a higher letter grade for consecutive years.

This study utilized an intentional selection process to identify a single urban district that met specific criteria. The district was selected based on the following criteria:

1. The district had an enrollment of at least 40,000 students.
2. The district's economically disadvantaged population was consistent with state averages, with roughly 60% of students identified as economically disadvantaged.
3. This district was in the top 10% of districts that improved letter grades for its D and F campuses and earned a district letter grade of C or higher.
4. Campus and district leaders had been in their current positions for at least two years and participated in turnaround initiatives.

The initial search identified 30 districts with a population of over 40,000 students in the state of Texas. Of the 30 districts that met the population requirement, 16 met the economically disadvantaged threshold of 60% or greater. Of the remaining 16 districts, there were three outlier districts that showed the greatest gains in improving overall letter grades of D and F-rated campuses. Each of the three districts made double-digit gains in the percentage of schools that improved with overall D and F letter grades. In the district identified for this study, 100% or nine out of nine schools that earned a D or F rating during the 2017-2018 school year earned a C or higher rating the following year, which marked a 19% improvement in schools improving their overall letter grade from a D or F rating.

Table 1

District D and F Letter Grades for Consecutive Years

	Total Schools	Overall District Score	D Letter Grade	F Letter Grade	Total D/F Schools	% of Campuses D or F Rating
2017-2018	47	79%	7	2	9	19%
2018-2019	47	87%	0	0	0	0%

Note: Campuses represented on this chart include traditional campuses with full student enrollment and received letter grades, not alternative campuses.

After the district selection process was completed, participants were identified using a purposeful selection process, identifying a heterogeneous group of turnaround principals and district-level administrators to participate in the study. A semi-structured interview process was conducted (Creswell, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Maxwell, 2012). Campus principals, cabinet-level administrators, and district directors selected for this study were required to either have led turnaround efforts at the school level or be directly involved with campus support during the academic year where the schools experienced the turnaround. The criteria also included them being in their current positions for at least two years and working directly at or with the identified turnaround campuses. The goal was to select participants that were the closest to the school turnaround work and systems, who could provide perspective and details about what led to the identified phenomenon.

Profile of Participants

Participants were identified through a selective referral process to ensure that those working most closely with school turnaround efforts were included in the study. The following district leaders were included in this study: three campus principals, executive director of leadership, executive director of assessment, assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership, and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Principals that were identified for participation were selected because their campuses experienced the most overall growth in the A-F accountability system, averaging a 21% increase in letter grade point totals when compared to the previous year's performance. Table 2 provides a breakdown of participants' years of experience in their current role, years in the district, and total years in education.

Table 2

Participant Years of Experience

Participant	**Years in Role**	**Years in District**	**Total Years**
Asst. Supt. of Curriculum and Instruction	11	33	38
Asst. Supt. of Innovation and Leadership	3	3	20
Executive Director of Accountability	10	37	37
Executive Director of Leadership Development	4	20	20
Principal A	3	20	20
Principal B	11	20	20
Principal C	12	25	25
Average	**7.7**	**22.5**	**25.7**

Data Collection

The interview included fifteen questions that start broad and narrow throughout the interview (See appendix A for the list of interview questions). Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured method, and interviews were recorded and coded using software. Interview questions were tailored to solicit clarification from participants while providing enough structure to ensure responses were organized in such a way that they adequately capture various perspectives. Participants completed two 60-minute semi-structured interviews. The first interview relied on open-ended responses to interview questions. The second interview was designed to allow participants time to reflect on responses from the first interview and respond to probing questions developed after the first round. The two-round interview structure was designed to help the researcher ask clarifying or probing questions and to ensure participant responses are not misrepresented. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

Pilot Case Study

A pilot case study was conducted prior to conducting the actual case study. Pilot case studies help researchers refine data collection plans and to make any necessary modifications to interview questions. The pilot case is a formative process which allows the researcher to make improvements to the case study design, such as developing relevant questioning techniques or leading to more clarification in the conceptual research design (Yin, 2018). The pilot study was based on convenience, where geographic proximity was the main criteria in determining which of the initially identified districts met selection criteria. Beyond geographical proximity, the researcher also has had previous personal contacts working in the pilot case study district which helped facilitate identification of participants and scheduling of interviews. Relying on

convenience, access, and geographic proximity to select a pilot case allows for a less structured process and an extended relationship to participants enabling the researcher to work through and enhance the process before conducting the full case study (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis Procedures

After the collection of data, a variety of methods were used to analyze the data. Data analysis procedures included transcribing and coding semi-structured interviews, analyzing and coding documents, and arranging and connecting data through analytic memoing. Interview transcripts were recorded verbatim, coded to identify patterns, and data was chunked and sorted into categories based on participant responses. Archival documents, including the district's organizational chart, district and campus improvement plans, and other web-based documents related to school turnaround initiatives, were also coded using the same coding practices. All reflections and any adjustments made to the coding process were captured with analytic memos and logged in a research journal.

Specific coding decisions can take place before, during, and after analyzing data (Saldana, 2016). Realizing the coding can be a fluid process, the initial three coding forms identified in this study included initial coding, process coding, and focused coding. Initial coding was employed first to break down the data into distinct parts. The goal of initial coding is to remain open to the possibilities and not limit the interpretation of the data. Initial coding "is a first step cycle, open-ended approach to coding the data" which allows the researcher to follow general guidelines while beginning to code data (Saldana, 2016, p. 115). The second coding process applied was process coding. Process coding is designed to help researchers identify observable actions and specific actions that have been implemented (Miles, Huberman, &

Saldana, 2014). The final coding process applied was focused coding. Saldana (2014) asserted that, "Focus coding enables you to compare newly constructed codes during this cycle across other participants' data to comparability and transferability" (p. 239). Focus coding is a second cycle coding method that allows the researcher to categorize coded data based on themes and similar concepts.

Ethical Considerations and Procedures

Before conducting any data, the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the proposal of this study. The names of the district, schools, and all participants were masked using pseudonyms in order to ensure high levels of anonymity and confidentiality in the data. Because case study research includes large data sources from multiple sources, it is important that the researcher ensures that data is retained and encrypted in a manner that protects the confidentiality of participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Masking data is an important component for building trust with participants and helps in establishing an interaction where interviewees feel that they can share responses openly and objectively without any judgment or retribution. The researcher reassured participants that all responses would be kept highly confidential, and all data collected would be stored in a secure location. Additionally, the researcher collected data using pre-planned pseudonyms and captured notes without revealing identities of participants, schools, and the district.

Position Statement and Validity Measures

It is important that researchers clarify potential biases to provide increased transparency about prior experiences, theory goals, preconceptions, and how bias can potentially impact the interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Maxwell, 2012).

Although it is impossible to completely eliminate the influence of the researcher in qualitative studies, the goal is to thoroughly understand potential influence and to use it to positively impact the study (Maxwell, 2012). The researcher of this study served as a principal supervisor that has supervised multiple turnaround campuses, including a comprehensive Improvement Required campus and two Accelerated Campuses of Excellence (ACE). The researcher has experiences working with campuses that have employed campus-level turnaround strategies. The researcher also has experience directing and supporting district-level school turnaround initiatives and was aware of potential biases based on experiences and perceptions of working with campuses deeply entrenched in school turnaround.

It is also important to understand that reflexivity is a "powerful and inescapable influence" on the interview process, where the interviewee can be influenced by the interviewer (Maxwell, 2012, p. 124). The researcher did not supervise or work with any of the participants in the study at the time of the interviews. Years prior to this study, one participant worked in the researcher's current district. However, it is possible that the participants, knowing the researcher's background working with other turnaround or ACE campuses, may respond differently and with perceived favorable responses. Understanding the potential impact of positionality and personal bias, the researcher used multiple validity procedures to ensure high levels of transparency and credibility. The first step was to write reflective memos to clearly outline any potential validity threats and to replicate this process throughout the study. Reflective memos provide alternative explanations that cover all possible validity threats to the study. Additionally, the researcher utilized a triangulation process to evaluate multiple forms of evidence while describing findings. The triangulation process "reduces the risk of chance

associations and a systemic bias due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 127).

Triangulation methods in this study included interviewing campus principals, principal supervisors, and district department directors, as well as reviewing documents and maintaining a reflective field journal. The researcher also recognized the importance of obtaining feedback from participants and submitted a short summary of findings while conducting follow-up interviews. Often referred to as member checking, participants can serve as objective judges and provide feedback before reporting final findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Finally, the researcher used peer debriefing protocols to increase accuracy in the findings. Peer debriefing involves an objective peer debriefer to review and interpret findings to add validity to the accounts (Creswell, 2018).

COVID-19 and Implications for the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the initial study design and limited access to participants. TEA (2020) suspended all accountability for the 2019-2020 school year as a result of school closures, noting that, "Given the impact of COVID-19, Governor Greg Abbott is using his statutory authority as the governor of Texas under Texas Government Code, §418.016 to suspend annual academic assessment requirements for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year." (para. 2). Instead of relying on 2020 data to identify the district for this case study, the researcher relied on available data from the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years to identify potential outlier districts. The lack of 2019-2020 assessment data also impacted the sustainability component of this study, where the researcher was interested in studying a district that made quick yet sustainable improvements in letter grades. Access to participants was also

limited due to the fact that district leaders were concerned with extra demands placed on school and district leaders during the pandemic and the potential impact of participants in the study. In order to gain access, the researcher acknowledged the added stress for all administrators, especially campus and district leaders charged with supporting students and teachers at the campus level, and provided assurance of minimal disruption to their already busy and stressful schedules. The district agreed to participate in the study with conditions that access was limited to seven participants.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology used to study the perceptions of campus and district leaders about specific factors that led to quick and sustainable turnaround in their district within an A-F accountability system. Case study research allowed the researcher to examine extreme cases and to understand how and why a particular phenomenon occurred. Additionally, this chapter also outlined how data analysis practices were employed, including the researcher's position statement and described validity measures that were employed throughout while collecting and analyzing data. Chapter four provides a profile of the school district in the study and a comprehensive discussion of the findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the district-level organizational structures and support systems district leaders perceive to have the greatest impact in improving campus letter grades at low-performing campuses. Specifically, this study was designed to identify the specific organizational structures and practices districts employ at the district level which result in a quick and sustainable turnaround at D or F-rated campuses. This chapter presents the results of the study based on data collected from interviews and campus/district artifacts. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What role do cabinet-level administrators and district directors play in improving and sustaining overall campus letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
2. What systems and structures were created at the cabinet or director level to improve and sustain overall letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
3. What barriers were removed to facilitate academic improvement across the district?

Previous chapters outlined practices applied at the campus and district level that led to a quick and sustainable turnaround for historically failing schools. Although evidence-based practices have been studied and identified in other case studies (DeVita et al., 2007; Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2016; Zavadsky, 2009), this study expanded on those findings; specifically examining the role of central office staff in supporting campuses in improving learning conditions and academic outcomes for low-performing schools in Texas' A-F accountability system.

The following criteria were used to identify the district and participants for this study:

- The district had an enrollment of at least 40,000 students.

- The district's economically disadvantaged population was consistent with state averages, with approximately 60% of students identified as economically disadvantaged.
- The district was in the top 10% of districts across the state that improved letter grades for its D and F campuses and earned a district letter grade of C or higher.
- Campus and district leaders have been in their current positions for at least two years and participated in turnaround initiatives.

For the purpose of anonymity, the pseudonym West Central ISD (WCISD)was used to mask the identity of the district. Pseudonyms were also assigned to all participants to build trust and confidence. The following sections provide descriptions of the district and participants, examining the perceptions of those involved in school turnaround about what led to the quick and sustainable academic improvements.

Description of West Central ISD

WCISD is located in a large urban region of Texas, encompassing roughly 60 square miles that border three other municipalities (WCISD Website). At the time of this study, the district served approximately 40,000 students at 49 campuses. There were 33 elementary schools, ten middle schools, and six high schools. Approximately 78% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged, and 27% were designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP). West Central ISD has a diverse student population, consisting of 58% Hispanic, 25% African American, and 13% white students. Another demographic factor to highlight was that 56% of students attending schools in the district were identified as at-risk of dropping out of school (TEA, 2019). West Central ISD is committed to academic excellence for

all students, and evidence of that commitment can be found in the district vision, mission, beliefs, and strategic objectives, which states:

Vision: Excellence Always

Mission: The mission of West Central ISD is to develop an inspiring and innovative learning community that educates and empowers students to pursue excellence.

Beliefs:

- Each student holds unique value and infinite promise.
- Experiences that foster collaboration, communication, curiosity, and contextual learning prepare students for a competitive workforce.
- Our democracy depends on educational experiences that develop responsible citizens.
- WCISD employees form a passionate learning family committed to professional growth.
- A diverse and involved community positively impacts our students.

Strategic Objectives:

1. Teaching and Learning: Every learning environment will be conducive to innovative instruction and meet the social, emotional and academic needs of our students and teachers.
2. Early Literacy: Every student will read on grade level by third grade.
3. Human Resources: Create a culture of excellence by maximizing human capital.
4. Funding and Finance: Maximize financial resources to further the mission of WCISD.

5. Facilities: Design, create and sustain innovative and adaptable space solutions that meet changing enrollment and learning needs.
6. Community Engagement: Promote community participation in every WCISD campus.
7. Communications: Communication will be effectively fostered between the District and the community (WCISD Website).

Changes in Demographics

Like many large urban districts in the state, West Central ISD experienced significant growth and changes in demographics over the last 20 years, changing from a white-majority district to a minority-majority district. In 2000, approximately 31,000 students attended West Central ISD schools, with 29% of students coming from economically disadvantaged households (TEA, 2000). The student population consisted of 62% white, 17% Hispanic, and 16% African American students (TEA, 2000). That was a sharp contrast when compared to the 2019 demographic data used for this study with an economically disadvantaged population that more than doubled. Seventy-eight percent of the overall student population were from households in poverty. While the white enrollment decreased by more than 50% to 30%, the Hispanic population increased to 59% of the total population in the 2019-2020 school year (TEA, 2019). The African American population remained roughly the same with a slight decrease, comprising 13% of the total population (TEA, 2019).

The 2019 staff demographics differ from student demographics; 62% of teaching staff was white, 19% Hispanic, and 16% African American. Teacher average years of experience was seven percent first year teachers, 34% one to five years of experience, 21% had six to 10 years

experience, 28% of teachers had 11-20 years of experience, and 10% had more than 20 years of experience (TEA, 2019). The average years of experience for teachers was 9.7 years. Approximately 46% of WCISD teachers held masters degrees, which was significantly higher than the state average of 24%. Principal average years of experience in WCISD was 6.6 years, with an average of 6.5 years of experience working as a principal within the district (TEA, 2019).

History of Academic Success

West Central ISD has had a long history of meeting and exceeding state accountability standards. Since the inception of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) in 2013 to the adoption of the state's A-F accountability system in 2017, West Central ISD campuses met and exceeded all state accountability targets. The 2017-2018 school year marked the first year the district had campuses not meet state and federal accountability targets which resulted in the identification of Improvement Required (IR) campuses. As a previously high-performing district, West Central ISD prioritized academic growth and implemented change to adapt to and meet the standards of a new accountability system for its underperforming campuses.

School District Accountability

The 2018-2019 school year marked only the second year of Texas' A-F accountability system and the last time that districts and schools received letter grades based on student performance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the cancellation of all STAAR assessments during the 2019-2020 school year, the most recent assessment data and campus letter grades are from the 2018-2019 school year. West Central ISD earned a B letter grade, with an overall score

of 87 in 2018-2019, which is an eight-point increase from its overall 79 and C rating in 2017-2018. West Central ISD also experienced growth in each of the three domains measured in Texas' accountability system. Table 3 displays the overall ratings and letter grades as well as ratings and letter grades for each domain.

Table 3

District Accountability Overview and Domain Ratings

School Year	Overall Rating/ Letter Grade	Domain One: Student Achievement	Domain Two: School Progress	Domain Three: Closing the Gaps
2018-2019	79 / C	74 / C	80 / B	75 / C
2019-2020	87 / B	81 / B	89 / B	82 / B

Eleven campuses improved overall A and B letter grades, and nine campuses improved D and F letter grades to C or higher. West Central also received a B rating in each of the three domains, earning an 81 in Student Achievement, 89 in School Progress, and 82 in Closing the Gaps domains. The district made seven to nine-point improvements in all three domains as compared to its 2017-2018 performance data, making the most growth in the School Progress domain with a score of 89. Table 4 shows a distribution of letter grades for consecutive years and by level.

Table 4

District Letter Grade Distribution for Consecutive Years

Year	Total Number of Schools	A Rating	B Rating	C Rating	D Rating	F Rating
2018	47	1	15	22	7	2
2019	47	4	23	20	0	0

Note: Campuses represented on this table include combined elementary, middle, and high school levels. Two additional campuses were built after the 2019 school year.

District Organizational Structure

Each of the 49 campuses was led by a principal and at least one assistant principal, depending on the size and level of the campus. The 2020 district organizational chart listed eight members in the superintendent's cabinet, including the superintendent, deputy superintendent, five assistant superintendents, and executive director of communication. Four executive directors of leadership development (EDLDs) supervised campus principals and reported directly to the assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership. EDLDs supervised campuses according to feeder patterns with each supervising about 12 to 13 schools, including one high school and multiple middle schools and elementary schools. For the purpose of this study, the focus of the research interviews was cabinet-level leadership and impact on campus turnaround

efforts. However, evidence of the superintendent's influence surfaced throughout the research and was included as an emergent theme in the following section that details the research findings from interviews and a review of the artifacts.

Emergent Themes

Several themes emerged during the interview process, where participants described a wide range of experiences and perceptions based on their respective campus and district leadership positions. The analysis included analyzing participant interviews, as well as district documents, such as website articles, district improvement plans, organizational charts, and other operational documents. The following section provides an analysis of the perceptions of participants' experiences that emerged as common themes within the context of each research question. Themes that emerged through the interview responses were organized by each of the three research questions. Responses also revealed overlapping themes as well as sub themes as detailed below.

Culture of Ownership

An overarching theme that emerged from the research connected directly to district culture and the superintendent's charge to move from a culture of compliance to a culture of ownership. The premise of an ownership culture or distributive leadership surfaced throughout this research process in interviews and in the review of district documents. The culture of ownership theme was outlined in the superintendent's compliance versus culture message to staff posted on the district website:

> A significant component of developing any culture is to make certain that your behaviors as an organization match your expressions of what you believe your culture to be. If we

> are to be serious in our effort to create an "Ownership Culture" in an educational setting, we have to be just as serious in creating a "distributive leadership" model as the operational paradigm. While in any organization you will have social and situational distribution of leadership, in the model being pursued by West Central ISD, the focus is more intentional than some random leadership structure that is dependent upon personalities in the organization. In our distributive leadership model, there are certain components that are vital in our efforts to overcome the chronically bad effects of the compliance-based structures that have been in place for years (WCISD Website).

In this website article, the superintendent identified two core components of this culture of ownership. The first is to "distribute leadership to the appropriate levels of the organization depending upon the nature of the responsibility and the capacity of the individuals to hold that leadership." He suggested decentralizing leadership and decision making as much as the system can allow, thus creating a system that can:

> Change the current practice of the central office management of the school or classroom and move this responsibility to the campus leadership or classroom teachers. As we do this, we also have to move the point of accountability and decision making closer to the point of responsibility. We have to recognize at the state and district level that we cannot innovate the space of that teacher and campus. We have to recognize that our role is in a different place. Our role is one of support for the designed efforts of campus leadership and teachers (WCISD Website).

A veteran principal noted this shift to an ownership culture started when the superintendent came in and adopted a distributive leadership framework which impacted the organizational structure

and how decisions were made and information was shared throughout the organization. In describing the origin of this approach and the shift from a top-down model, she shared how meetings were structured and information communicated in the prior system, explaining:

> So that came from a restructuring of what our district looked like and how we operated. Because I've been a principal so long, I have the background knowledge of what it used to be like as a principal, versus what it's like now. It was a major shift. What it used to be like was our district staff meetings [were] once a month. And at that staff meeting we heard from every department. Meaning, we heard from curriculum. We heard from assessment. We heard from HR. We heard from special ed. We heard directly from our superintendent about the board meeting the night before. It was always those five areas. Then there might be something else. And during that time we were told what, when, where, how, and why. There was a really defined structure of what our district is doing, and this is how we're gonna do it.

This approach described above changed significantly with the new superintendent, with campus leadership being much more involved in decision making compared to prior years. The second component is developing leadership capacity throughout the organization. The superintendent noted in his compliance versus ownership article that moving the "point of accountability and decision making closer to the point of responsibility" required building leadership capacity at different levels of the organization. He provided the following explanation:

> This includes such things as the ability to engage people in leadership opportunities, knowing when to provide support v. pressure, moving from authority to influence in leadership, how to have "eyes on" student performance and adult behavior, aligning

> behaviors to culture, creating more autonomous environments and much more. While not intended to be an exhaustive list of what should be a part of leadership capacity development, the importance is to have regular, ongoing and deep conversations and growth opportunities for key people in the organization to develop as leaders (WCISD Website).

A culture of ownership and developing leadership capacity was a common theme throughout the interview process. The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership made connections with both when he noted:

> In my experience, you know, I tried a lot of things. I've tried developing systems from a central office perspective. And once the person from central office left, it was never going to be implemented with the fidelity that it needed to. Nor was it going to be owned by that organization. So we focused on ownership. We focused on that leadership perspective, developing that leader, but not only the principal. Our ownership culture actually points to developing all sources of leadership. Leadership in West Central is not confined to a title. We have teacher leaders. We have campus leaders. We even have paraprofessionals that lead in certain areas. And so taking away that leadership ability from a title was huge here for us. And so teachers started leading. Principals started building capacity in their organization. They owned the process. And then, from central office, it was a matter of supporting.

The executive director of accountability also described the importance of the ownership culture when discussing how the district supported principals in defining ownership and providing clear expectations.

> Well, we have an ownership culture in our district and helping principals understand what ownership means that goes back to that other piece of defining what the box is and how we can be innovative. We have to then go through the process of ensuring that they understood that even when you do whatever the heck you want, whenever you want or not do anything when you want, you know. The ownership is that you own every student on their instruction and their growth.

She also noted the importance of all levels taking ownership in the work when discussing how departments respond to data and help build capacity at the teacher level. She shared the following insight:

> And so I think that that's critical because I think it is critical [at the department level] that the various curriculum subject areas within curriculum [coordinators] look at data as well, and they do, and they look at it by individual school. They look at it by individual teacher, and then they'll contact the campus and say, "you want me to come out [and work] with this grade level?" It's really about developing capacity in your teachers and in your leadership team on each campus. And the more we can develop that capacity for them to make the decisions and to take ownership is an important piece.

A culture of ownership theme also emerged throughout the research process in the artifacts that were analyzed. The following sections present data for each of the three research questions with corresponding themes. The culture of ownership theme is also integrated where evident for each research question.

Question one: What role do cabinet-level administrators and district directors play in improving and sustaining overall campus letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?

The first research question identified the role cabinet-level or central office director-level personnel had in improving campus-level performance in the current A-F accountability system in Texas. Specifically, this question was designed to unpack specific actions central office personnel took to improve campus letter grades. During the interview process, it quickly became evident that participants felt central office played a pivotal role in improving campus letter grades. Participating principals indicated that support from central office was essential in turning around their schools and improving letter grades. According to one principal, she would not have been able to improve her campus rating to a B letter grade without the support from central office, sharing, "I couldn't have asked for a more supportive central office." Another principal expressed her appreciation for central office support efforts by stating that, "Central office definitely supported the campus turnaround efforts. That support looks like a lot of different things because there are so many different central office departments." Another principal noted, "I couldn't have asked for anything better from my district," while reflecting on how much she appreciated the supportive approach the district took across the organization. Clearly, the perception of these campus leaders demonstrated that WCISD district leaders played a pivotal role in campus achievement.

Three distinct practices emerged after delving deeper into the data on what role central office administrators played in improving and sustaining campus letter grades. Those practices included leadership autonomy and district support, building leadership capacity throughout the

organization, and implementing an "eyes on" mentality to closely monitor and respond to data or practices.

Leadership autonomy and balancing district support. Participants consistently spoke of the importance of campus leaders to have autonomy to make decisions at the campus level and the balance between campus autonomy and district-level support. Participants attributed their success to the superintendent's focus on distributive leadership, describing it as "one of his big mantras" and a core component of how the district operates. The superintendent described this more in the compliance versus culture of ownership article on the district website:

> What is clear is that we have in large part neutered the ability of the teacher to be a decision-maker with the resulting impact being that a gap has developed in connecting personal actions with corporate consequences, especially true in larger districts. In an "Ownership Culture" the employee feels a substantial and personal stake in the corporate performance, which is missing in our current culture. This has occurred due to the treatment teachers have received in a "Compliance-based Culture." While we may say that we value the teacher as an instructional leader and we may even provide them with professional development that is intended to strengthen their skills sets as instructional leaders, we have also prescribed exactly what they do in the classroom through our structures and expectations. At the district and state level we have effectively commercialized the classroom, and the resulting impact is that, while we still have many dedicated teachers fighting to provide the best for our children, we also have many dissatisfied and potentially angry consumers teaching our children. This must change to mirror what the successful businesses are doing today. Business leaders have recognized

> that creating an "Ownership Culture" results in a nimble organization that can respond to the changing environment and grow their bottom line. Compliance structures limit, by definition, nimbleness and responsiveness, and ultimately lead to the failure of the business.

Participants described autonomy as a core tenant of distributive leadership and an ownership culture. The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership provided an example of what that looked like at the campus when he shared that it is important to understand that each school is different, noting:

> So we have to give them the autonomy to be nimble and responsive to their staff and their kids. I think that was very successful for us and a good aha moment for us that not every school has to do the same strategies. Not every school has to do the same thing or be at the same pace. And that the leader doesn't have to be at the same place because maybe this leader never was going to get data, but they have an AP that was good at it. And it's okay to delegate that task. You stay connected to it, but let that person own it and take care of it. And you can get the same results, what you are still developing that yourself and that takes being vulnerable and being able to accept those things. It takes a climate of understanding and trust to get that feel.

In describing the most impactful actions taken at the district level, a principal responded, "I think empowering campuses with the autonomy that we have to make the best decisions for our staff and students. I think that is very impactful." Another principal described this in more detail when sharing where campus autonomy and district support converged:

I've led with the mindset of, you have to check in with me when you come to this campus. I say it's a dual coded question because there were people that would just show up on campus and run their own agenda because they're trying to help. And I kept that mindset; you're trying to help, let me tell you how you can help what I need and here's what this campus needs. And so the actions have to be focused on the mission at that campus. And that became powerful when it was all aligned to the turnaround efforts.

Another principal expanded on the concept of principal autonomy, adding:

> One thing that really is remarkable [about] it all is nobody told me what to do. No one said, I mean, I had a growth plan that said some specifics I would do, but no one said, this is how you're going to run your school. No one said you have to post the lesson plans. It was suggested, but it was never put to me as this is something compliant you have to do. It was put to me as why wouldn't you hold your teachers accountable for teaching what they've already planned. And so I did have that freedom and that responsibility to make those choices, even through it all, I never felt like someone was telling me how to run my school.

In WCISD, the goal was to move the point of decision making closer to the point of responsibility. The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership further explained:

> And so all that work, it was a huge campaign that incorporated the four core values that we hold true today. Incorporating the distributive leadership model that we see implemented at campuses. So our principals today feel free to make decisions on their campuses that are best for them. Some of our high schools have different schedules. Some of our campuses have advisory one day. Some have advisory every day of the

week because we give them the autonomy to make those decisions at their level and be nimble and responsive to their organizational needs and not just dictate it from central office.

He expanded on this idea further, saying:

> But if the principal feels that at this particular point, my kids and my students and my staff need to change this plan, they feel comfortable enough to say, I need to discontinue this plan and I need to work on this. And then we created other strategies to address it because they're the ones in the trenches. You know, if you see firsthand what's occurring and we have to give them the power for them to fix it, otherwise where Dr. Jones [superintendent] has that same [belief that], we're creating solutions for problems that we don't have. And so that's not what we want to do. We want to be nimble and responsive to what our kids and our staff need at that particular school. Not the district, but the school because our schools are different.

Principals highlighted the importance of finding balance between district support and principals directing improvement plans and interventions at the campus level. A principal explained:

> I pretty much felt like in the district's mind that there wasn't a, what I would call, one voice and that everybody came to the table together. I often said at the beginning, I need, and I expressed this to my DCSI (District Coordinator of School Improvement) and my executive director. Everybody needs to come to the table, and I need you to focus on the mission of our campus and the action plans that we have in place that are tied to our targeted improvement plan. I understand that people are unhappy with me right now, but I'm trying to get us out of school improvement by an accountability sanction. There are

good things happening on this campus, and this is where I need help. So when people come back and tell you that I'm not on board with them, this is why. And so, the difficulty and the large district is having one voice instead of people operating in silos.

Principals expressed the importance of balancing central office support, yet maintaining autonomy to make decisions at the campus level. Another principal explained this further as she discussed the importance of alignment between central office support and campus initiatives:

> You have to have one voice because back to what I talked about with alignment and people working in silos, rather than working as a team to support. And you need to empower the principal to be able to walk with and have the confidence to say, this is my school, and this is our plan, and this is what we're going to do. And so those decisions are made at the very beginning. I think that's difficult to do in a large district.

Although participants consistently viewed campus autonomy and distributive leadership positively, some participants acknowledged that there can be downsides to giving too much autonomy to campus leaders. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction expressed this sentiment when describing how her department helped campuses make better decisions about selecting instructional resources:

> And so you have to ask the questions of those campuses to know, "are you using the data? Are your teachers doing assessments every month? Are they using guided reading groups based on the assessments that they're getting?" You know, if you don't ask those questions, then you can't make those good, level decisions. And Dr. Jones [superintendent] is such a proponent of distributive leadership. That is one of his really

> big mantras. He wants campuses to decide what they want to use and to have input on. And so we have some decisions that are made at the campus level.

The executive director of leadership development shared a similar sentiment when depicting the drawbacks of campus autonomy:

> We are an ownership culture, which I love. Which means we don't mandate a lot, which is also a very nice thing, but I think the negative is that sometimes things need to be mandated. I feel like sometimes there are things we could get done a lot faster that all campuses need if we weren't so autonomous in our leading, I love it for the most part, but there are times I think would best to be black and white on an issue. That held us back.

Building leadership capacity. Another theme that emerged in the data was connected to a concentrated focus on building capacity of campus leaders. West Central ISD's commitment to building leadership capacity and professional growth was evident in their core beliefs, which state, "West Central employees form a passionate learning family committed to professional growth." This commitment to professional growth is also found in several places including district strategic plan objectives such as to "create a culture of excellence by maximizing human capital" and a corresponding strategy of establishing "a district support system that focuses on the retention and development of highly qualified employees." The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership attributed much of the district's success to leadership development and investing in school leaders. The focus on building capacity of leadership was connected directly to distributive leadership and an ownership culture. An emphasis on building capacity to support an autonomous environment was captured in the superintendent's culture versus compliance website article:

> There are two areas of leadership development that require special focus. The first is in the area of autonomous environments. In our model this is referred to as defined autonomy and it is key to creating a distributive leadership operation and thus an "Ownership Culture." Simply put, organizations have to create definitions for people to operate under, but in an organization that embraces defined autonomy the effort is for people to increase their capacity to the level that those definitions can be removed and replaced with autonomous actions. As an example in today's educational environment you have benchmarks that teachers are required to give on a regular basis in order to ensure student learning is taking place (not the best educational practice one should use). If a teacher's capacity were increased in formative assessment practices and differentiation and then implemented, the practice of benchmarking could be removed as an operational definition as it would not only be unnecessary, it would actually be an impediment to this teacher's ability to improve their student's performances. This doesn't change the value of assessment, it changes the structure of it, which will lead to greater student performance.

Responding to a question about the most impactful actions taken at the district level to effectively support campus turnaround, the assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership attributed the success to "the unequivocal focus on leadership development. I've been part of many organizations and I've seen top top-down initiatives, aiming at rapid improvement or school turnaround. And I saw a lot of turnaround of the principal role. We've been pretty steady in our organization." While discussing the importance of developing the instructional capacity of everyone involved in the turnaround process, the executive director of accountability noted:

> ...building that capacity among the people who were actually doing the walkthrough to know what they were looking for within classrooms and that alignment piece, I think that became, we honed skills in that area. And in so doing we honed skills for the people that were part of those walkthroughs, including the principals, assistant principals leadership team members. Capacity was built in those people to really evaluate instruction and what is going on in the classroom better. And sometimes that took the actual curriculum coordinator walking with, frequently, that took the actual curriculum coordinator being part of that walk through team and building capacity in the EDLD and building capacity in the principal and building capacity in all those people to really understand what the TEK was saying.

Emphasizing the importance of building capacity in instructional leadership on campus leadership teams, starting with the principal, a principal explained:

> When I'm talking about leadership capacity, I'm talking about [how] the principal has got to understand this shift, that it's about instruction. The instructional capacity has to be there at the top. This is a side note. You can reference the shift in leadership from managerial leadership at the principal level to now instructional leadership at the level. There was a shift in policy and what that looks like. And so depending on the experience that the principal determined that they have that how long they've been around determines if they have that continue to have that ability, right. And then their leadership team, whoever makes that up, that leadership capacity has to start at the principal.

Principals attributed much of their professional growth to coaching they received from their EDLD, DCSI, or mentor. Coaching was a core function of the EDLD role, where the

EDLD regularly scheduled coaching visits around data meetings or while conducting collaborative walkthroughs with principals. While describing the impact of coaching on her personal growth, a principal shared, "My executive director just has been a pivotal person that grows me, makes me grow. She coaches me and she is that listening ear." Another principal described the importance of coaching when describing coaching she received from the executive director of accountability, who is also the district's DCSI, sharing, "And so she became my go-to person and the conversations that I had with her and still do are empowering. She's kind of one of those people that she can say something in two sentences and leave you going, ah, thank you!"

Relying on a coaching framework to build leadership capacity was a point of emphasis throughout the organization. Although the primary role of the EDLD is to build leadership capacity with principals, additional coaches were brought in to fill any gaps in learning on an individualized basis. The assistant superintendent of innovation and instruction added:

> What was seen as punitive as, ooh, you got a coach. Now it is, "can I get a coach?" or "I only got her one year? Can I get her another year?" I even met with a principal that wasn't on that year, and, "Why am I getting a coach?" And at the end of the year, "Can I keep her another the year? And I was like, oh, at first you didn't want her. And now you want to keep her another year. And she was like, "it was amazing what I was able to do, the ideas that I was able to bounce off her." That's what was an obstacle about getting somebody to come talk to them about my leadership as a negative versus now is like, "Ooh, I haven't had my turn with a mentor. Can I get it?" And so I think, I think that's a complete reversal of the mindset of our leaders because they see that we did not look at it as a punitive thing. It's about if I can grow you in your leadership journey. We all admit

> at the cabinet level, we have not arrived at our leadership journey. We still have gaps, right? But we continue to grow. We continue to have a coach personally. The superintendent has a coach. And so do every one of us. You know, if they have a coach, it's okay if I have a coach. So we've modeled that for them.

Building capacity and continuous learning does not stop at the top of the organization. Because professional growth was a main tenet of the district's core beliefs, the district placed an emphasis on building capacity at all levels of the organization. There were leadership programs for aspiring assistant principals and aspiring principals. The district also hosted programs for teacher leaders, such as the Excellence in Teaching Incentive program (ETIP), which according to the district website, was intended to "support career growth and aspiration in our educators, but we also believe that talented educators who feel their talents are best served in the classroom, should be able to stay in the classroom while reaching their professional goals."

"Eyes on" and active monitoring at all levels. While the focus on autonomy and growth was prominent in responses, data also highlighted the importance of monitoring practices at all levels. Participants regularly referred to monitoring practices as "eyes on", where directors and other district-level personnel regularly monitored student performance data and the implementation of action plans at the campus level. A principal described "eyes on" in this way: "Instruction is the most important. I have to have my eyes on instruction. I have to have my eyes on planning. It means you have to be there. You can't have eyes on without being there." An executive director of leadership development described what eyes on looks like in practice as she works closely with her principals:

> We are there at least once a week; coaching, walking with them, talking through problems, looking at data, making sure they're meeting their benchmarks for the cycle data. And then "eyes on." We are also eyes. "Can I see things you're doing? Is there evidence of what you are doing is making a difference?" I really feel like it's that person walking alongside them through the journey. And you know, sometimes you can set all the goals in the world, but you're so familiar with your culture and your people, that you don't see some of the biggest problems. It's that outside pair of eyes that helps.

In his compliance versus ownership message, the superintendent described "eyes on" in more detail:

> The second area of leadership development that requires special focus is that of "eyes on." In the compliance-based system "eyes on" is often a role that involves a teacher or campus leader being responsible for certain measures created by a supervising agent at the district level. Following certain timelines reports are developed and after being consumed by the supervising agent, meetings would be set up in which the campus personnel is called to explain the results and then create action steps. In an "Ownership Culture" with a distributive leadership operation, this is problematic. Remember that we need to move the point of accountability and decision making closer to the point of responsibility, thus changing the nature of how "eyes on" occurs. In this system, "eyes on" centers around the campus personnel gathering data, developing plans on a regular basis and then reporting actions and needed supports upward to supervising agents. While this is a subtle difference it is significant to the development of leadership and ownership. From the supervisor perspective "eyes on" centers around coaching

> conversations, reflective questioning strategies, and in an educational setting being present at the place of accountability (principal in the classroom, central office administrator at the campus) in order to verify integration of the campus plan into the learning going on at the campus.

In describing how curriculum coordinators and facilitators take an "eyes on" approach while analyzing data and determining where to push in support, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction shared:

> And they ask us a lot of questions about, yeah, we do. Yeah, we do, because we're trying to support leadership or trying to support turning things around. And so the district system, I mean, my people, not content people, every time we have an assessment, they are diving into data. We're looking at it, we're looking at it at the school level, the campus level we're looking at at the teacher level, we're looking at it, you know, how else can we do? And then we send the troops out. Our facilitators then go out and have conversations with the teachers that are in that bottom quartile of scores. And, you know, tell me about this. So they're collegial, but they are idea producing. "What about this? Have you done this? Are you following scope and sequence? What scope and sequence are you looking at in the curriculum?"

The executive director of leadership development outlined what "eyes on" looks like at the campus and district in further detail, stating:

> It's as simple as in the classroom. It means a teacher is struggling teaching something. She tells the principal when she's going to do the reteach. Principal goes and watches it. For me, I have a campus that is really struggling this year. Massive turnover. So we're

> doing some full on waterfall coaching. And so I go on and watch the waterfall coaching. It is the principals job to watch the waterfall coaching with her IS [instructional specialist], but I go to the principal and watch the follow up she gives them to make sure that it's all aligning, it's all working together and then checking her. "What's your evidence of impact that your IS is making a difference on this?"

A principal elaborated on the "eyes on" process, describing how it applied to the campus-level. The principal explained further:

> ["Eyes on"] kind of goes back to visibility, you know being visible, being right there and having the eyes on not just eyes on data, but also eyes on the classroom eyes on lesson plans. We have a campus wide lesson planning template, and that was a big change because before the teachers, they didn't even meet together as a PLC. I mean we had [a lot] of growing to do so now we meet in PLCs. We have a lesson planning template where everything that they need in their lesson plans, of course, is there. And we've added this year. Some of the Bambrick pieces, like for example, they create the exemplar and link it right there to their Google Drive. They also do the aggressive monitoring laps. They actually list in their lesson planning what their labs are going to be for each day for that subject. So you know, very specific at the end of the lesson. "What do you want your students to be able to do higher order questions?" So we have to have eyes on those lesson plans, of course, and then in the classroom. And as you know, the principal can't have eyes on everything all the time. I have to coach. I received coaching from my EDLD, and then I coach my assistant principal, my campus intervention specialist, and

also my instructional specialist. So they are key members of the leadership team and they have eyes on as well.

The executive director of accountability provided insight of what "eyes on" meant from the district level:

> The EDLDs are on campus. They're walking with principals periodically. Central office curriculum instruction, people with the data that we do then easily run, just lists to see where they need to actually go take a walk themselves, you know, to see who they can help or call a campus and say, "would you like for me to come to your planning?" You know, during this time, so I can have my eyes on that way. I have similar "eyes on" and looking at data knowing where sometimes I just walked down to the curriculum department and say, "Have you been to Williamson Elementary? Fourth grade math looks like they're struggling." You know, "Have they called you or have you been out there?" So it's kind of nice that we're all in the same building and we work. We're not, we try not to, we are siloed, but we try not to be siloed. I think every big district is siloed, but so that's kind of what it looks like. We run reports. A matter of fact, I've got reports to push out right now from our DCP 3, and people look at them and principals now people are looking at them and when I push them out, it's every campus in the, and here's how they lie on it. So you don't have to be at the top, but if you're at the bottom and you're 10 points below everybody else you've got problems and everybody in the district knows it.

To summarize, the data suggested that cabinet-level administrators can have a positive impact on school turnaround efforts, leading to improved letter grades in Texas' A-F

accountability system. This section highlighted the three main themes that emerged about the role cabinet-level administrators play in supporting campus turnaround. The next section examines what specific structures WCISD had in place to support school turnaround.

Question two: What systems and structures were created at the cabinet or director level to improve and sustain overall letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?

Existing research has highlighted the importance of central office structures and their impact on school improvement (Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Mac Iver and Farley, 2003; Meyers and Smylie, 2017; Rorrer et al., 2008; 2017; Zavadsky, 2009). The purpose of this research question was to identify specific systems or structures implemented at the cabinet or director level that led to improved letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system. Cabinet level was defined as central office personnel that belong to the superintendent's advisory cabinet. However, for the purpose of this study, the term cabinet members was broadened to be defined as the director-level position or higher. Organizational structures were defined as organizational charts and responsibilities assigned to central office personnel. Organizational structures also refer to the supervisory role and the decision making ability of central office personnel. Data analysis from interviews and district documents revealed three themes that connected to the study's conceptual framework of district-level practices that support school improvement efforts. These included coherence between the central office and campuses, evidence-based decision making, and differentiated support and resource allocations based on campus needs.

Coherence between central office and campuses. Research highlights effective practices in centralized and decentralized systems with the importance placed on having strong coherence between central offices and campuses (Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009).

Districts that achieve the highest levels of coherence are those that recognize the importance of intermediary roles that coordinate work with schools (Johnson et al., 2015). According to interview participants, the creation of the EDLD position to serve as that intermediary between central office and campuses was a significant component in creating an alignment between central office and campus. The creation of the EDLD role provided positional clarity with clearly outlined primary job responsibilities which included supervision and coaching campus principals. Prior to the creation of the EDLD role, there was an area operator position, and the responsibilities of that person included overseeing departments in addition to supervising campus principals. The executive director of accountability explained further:

> I think when Dr. Jones [superintendent] really established those EDLD positions, and took [away] the programs. Because we already had all those positions, the problem was all those people also, including myself when I was one of them, we actually had programs. So we weren't quite as concentrated on your campuses. You were more of the person that appeals came to, you know, when you also had all those appeals and everything, so there was a restructure at the district level and all that attendance, all of that discipline went to another department. There was another department created that took care of all of that, which freed up the EDLDs to concentrate on their campuses more.

The intense focus on instruction and supporting the development of school leadership by developing organizational structures allowed EDLDs to spend the majority of their time working directly with principals and campuses. This principal support structure was explained further in the compliance versus ownership culture message from the superintendent, which states:

> The executive directors of leadership development is designed to build campus administration leadership by having designated central office staff present on campuses 75% of their days walking with and working with principals. The focus is on building the principals' leadership capacity in developing their teachers as instructional leaders and developing their own abilities to meet their campus designed outcomes.

A former principal and current executive director of leadership development added:

> I think the creation of this position by our superintendent was probably the best move. I can say that as a principal. My last year as principal, I had an EDLD, and it was completely different than having an area operator, because you had someone who really knew your teachers, they knew your struggles, they didn't just come and visit every once in a while. I really appreciated that.

The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership highlighted the importance of the EDLD role, and acknowledged that at times, it can be a challenge to protect their time and responsibilities by not adding additional duties or including them in other projects to build their capacity beyond coaching and developing principals. He added that sometimes the superintendent regularly reminds him of why the role was developed. The assistant superintendent explained:

> The superintendent actually quarterly reminds me of that. This is his. He created this position. Sometimes in the development and growth of people as they have other aspirations, you expose them to different areas. And so he reminds me constantly of that position was created to support principals. "Don't you ever forget that?" And I said,

"Yes, sir." That position has been around for four or five years because it was before I got here.

Analysis of data revealed that the EDLD position was vital to school improvement and district turnaround initiatives. The creation of this position shifted the focus to instructional leadership and clearly delineated responsibilities. Responsibilities listed on the job posting included:

- Administer various programs as assigned by the administration.
- Act as a support and resource to assigned cluster of schools.
- Conduct performance reviews with principals of cluster schools.
- Review Campus Improvement Plans for each assigned campus.
- Disaggregate testing data and use to make improvements to the instructional program.
- Provide coaching and professional learning opportunities to further growth of principals of cluster schools.
- Provide professional learning opportunities to build capacity of aspiring principals of cluster schools.
- Perform other duties as assigned.

Six out of the eight primary duties listed on the job description related directly to instructional leadership and leadership capacity. The change in the EDLD role marked a significant shift in the responsibilities. An EDLD described the transition she made from campus principal to this newly defined role intended to support and grow instructional leadership on campuses, explaining further why she decided to apply:

> We had typically [had] this role that had been what they call the area operator and special programs and saw schools. So these people were rarely on school grounds. I would never have applied for that job. And then our new superintendent came in and the year before I became an executive director, he took all those extra programs away and they were just about coaching leaders.

Reflecting on how much support her EDLD provided during her first year leading a school in turnaround, another principal shared:

> My executive director has just been amazing; just the amount of support that she gives. But she challenges me to step out of my comfort zone and to try new things. She has also built a lot of confidence in me as a first year principal. And now third year principal, I'm a veteran now, just so we all know after three years, I guess you're a veteran. It's one of those things where she encourages each one of us in the feeder pattern; the principals that she develops and works with. And also, she identifies specific strengths that each one of us has and she plays to those strengths, and she will even have us as principals to present information to others, especially when she sees those strengths and that way we help each other and repeat her pattern. She's really just developed that culture of sharing in the feeder pattern amongst all of our principals. And that way we can be there as a support system for each other. And I think that has been just a part of the culture in our turnaround.

In summary, the EDLD position serves as an intermediary role between central office and campuses, which is vital in building leadership capacity and providing high levels of coherence between central administration and schools. The transition from area operator to EDLD clarified

positional responsibilities, improving two-way communication and, therefore, streamlining school improvement efforts.

Evidence-based decision making. Another central office system that emerged in the data related to evidence-based decision-making practices employed at the district level. This theme connected directly to the conceptual framework which included multiple considerations of how districts use data and evidence to inform decision making, including how to provide additional support or resources. Throughout the interview process, participants referenced systems to rely on evidence to make decisions. Several participants referred to this as "evidence of impact." The executive director of leadership development explained, "We define evidence of impact as two things: change in teacher behavior or an improvement in student achievement. And usually those go hand in hand, but sometimes you can't have one without the other." All participants made some reference to using data to inform practice. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction provided an example of using data and evidence to determine what amount of support or resources campuses required of the central office, stating:

> The other thing that I think has been incredibly transformational, but it has transformed within itself as well, is our DAT system. And that's the data assistance teams. And so many, many years ago, before A-F, we knew with struggling campuses, if they knew what to do, they would have done it. They don't know. They're not getting traction on what they were doing. And so when we would look at district-wide data and that would be our checkpoints or before that they were called our periodic district assessment. But we do those for data purposes, but we also look at it for how can we support? How can we help?

The Data Assistance Team (DAT) met after each District Checkpoint (DCP), assessments which are administered once every nine weeks. She expanded on the DCP process, describing the impact of district teams supporting campuses:

> Our DCPs, our district checkpoints are going to probably be the most overarching thing that we're doing throughout the system that we put a lot of stock and value in. And that happened at the campus level to look at what's going on at the campus, but it also happens at the district. And definitely it happens at the department level because if my people can't talk to me about the last DCP and what they saw on the DCP, where they need to target, you know, we're utilizing instructional time, and it's wasted if we're not using the data. So I think that is one of the things that we have to evaluate effectiveness about because we own the pieces to do that.

The executive director of assessment expanded on monitoring the data and highlighted the importance of all levels closely reviewing the data:

> Everyone's looking at the data, and they're looking at it from the standpoint of who needs assistance. If I'm a curriculum person, I'm looking at the data. The EDLDs are looking at the data to give feedback. And that's one of the things we basically talk about are systems and processes at the campus and what needs to happen. We talk about two things. We talk about who needs capacity built and how we are going to support that, and we talk about the systems, the processes that the campus has in place.

She expanded on how district departments and campus teams evaluate and respond to the data from the DCP assessments:

> Once we get the data from the DCP, then it is us looking out. In the meantime, if they [campus principal and leadership team] see some struggles within, they can contact the district. Or if they have a lot of new teachers in one specific grade level, they don't know what they don't know. But each of our campuses also have what we call a leadership team. And so that's something that has been built over the last five or six years. They act as a team. The principal is certainly the final authority and the final word, but they utilize that team a lot to support when they need support on their campus. If they can't handle it, they will reach out to the facilitators and coordinators. And then when we do [review the] data, it tells us whether or not their outreach has been sufficient or if [the district] should have reached out. You know, that kind of thing.

A principal shared her perspective of reviewing data at DAT meetings and drilling down to the individual student level:

> One of the things that we do as a district, after each district checkpoint, we have some district folks that come to the campus, and we call it a DAT meeting. And at the data assistive team meeting, we all meet and we look at the data, and we look at tons of data. What I love about West Central ISD is that we are very data-rich. If you want data about something, we'd probably have it. And at the data meeting, what we do is we look at every grade, every subject, and we analyze how the kids did, and we go right to the item analysis. We look at specific students. We look at specific student groups because as you know, that's very important and the accountability system. Also, at those DAT meetings, it is the campus level leadership team that meets with the district-level folks. We meet on the data along with the content level coordinators and or facilitator that I asked to be

there. And so we all sit around the table, we analyze the data. What I love is that when the content level coordinators [are there], I'm able to ask them questions, right. Then they're to give me input. They create the tests. So they're able to say, okay, on this inference question, your kids did really well, but on this inference question, they did not do well.

Another principal elaborated on the DAT and the role of central office participation. According to the principal, an executive director of leadership development and the executive director of assessment participate in all priority campus DAT meetings, and the principal can invite others to attend at his or her discretion. This was a significant change to how DAT meetings operated in previous years, when multiple departments participated. The principal described this process, sharing, "Recently the shifts [have] been kind of trying to give the principal more autonomy and who they want to come out to support the work beyond their EDLD and DCSI. The changes in this process to give principals more ownership and autonomy. She explained further, "Prior to that change [new superintendent and new process], the principal did not have any say in who came." This shift placed the onus on campus principals to decide what additional departments they would like to invite to the DAT meeting and was an attempt to move the point of decision making closer to the point of responsibility, as set forth by the superintendent. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction explained this shift to provide principals more autonomy and accountability further:

Before, when we talked about assisting campuses, we looked at the data and then we determined at the central office level who needed to be included in that data assistance team meeting, because we could see it. And we knew that if their fifth grade science was

> at the bottom, that's a make or break with accountability because the only shot you have is fifth grade. And so we would make sure that the science coordinator sat in on that DAT because we saw the data. We don't do that anymore. The principal now determines who's invited to the data system team meeting because the principal is taking accountability [and] responsibility for that campus data.

The research clearly highlighted that data practices were established at the district level to support campus leadership teams with administering and analyzing student assessments. DCPs were administered each nine-week cycle to evaluate student mastery of skills, and software programs were available to assist campus leadership teams in evaluating individual student growth data. The district also established a DAT to review data, and central office personnel regularly attend to provide additional perspective and support for campuses which has been instrumental in supporting school turnaround efforts. These were two key structures that central office leaders created to support campus progress as perceived by participants.

Differentiated support for campuses. Another central office system that emerged was the implementation of a differentiated support and resources structure based on campus needs. Consistent with the current research and the conceptual framework of this study, data showed that WCISD adjusted support, resources, and training according to the needs of campuses. The assistant superintendent of innovation noted the importance of aligning resources as he described the important role that central office leadership plays in supporting campuses, stating, “Aligning resources should be our entire job. Aligning resources to ultimately having equitable student results, but resources give the principals what they need to make an impact on those students so

they can get those equitable results." He expanded further, describing the rationale behind allocating support based on needs:

> We differentiate our leadership support, and that does two things. It doesn't exhaust the system because you only have [a] limited amount of resources, and you triage basically like you would do in a medical institution. And you address your higher need first with the most, but also differentiate. I'm not going to assign somebody to do walks with someone for alignment or rigor when they're already strong in that. And they need help and follow through, well, they need help with troubleshooting ideas. They don't need that other support. So we don't give it to them. We take those people that we're going to be doing that, and we'll assign them to another campus. And so it's just basically not creating a cookie cutter approach to support. And then our principals appreciate it because they're not focusing on things they don't need to be doing.

The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction reiterated the importance of differentiation, sharing, "I think just having that mindset of one size fits all was probably very unsuccessful." She further explained the process to reviewing data to prioritize campuses and push in support:

> And so when you look at those data pieces, then you have to see where are we pushing in and what we are doing to assist and to make sure we are doing that? Our assessment person, she will look over the data from a very holistic [level], and then we'll have our targeted campuses. Who are campuses that have either really fallen or who maybe have a brand new principal. And there's just a big change in data. You know, who's slipping? Who's not being effective? And then those are our campuses that the district

> improvement plan would list. I mean, everybody knows. And then we document and we go out to provide assistance to that campus. Can't do it with all 48. There is not enough of us there. There's not enough resources, so we have to target, but then we always make ourselves available to people who ask [for support]. We know where our targets are. We know where we need to be, not only on campus, but providing support for them, but then looking at data with them throughout the year to make sure that they're improving and not staying where they are. So all of that requires a lot of people talking about it, naming names and campuses, but also, what's the plan? What are we going to do? And that's important.

To determine what campuses needed and to help align support structures, campuses and campus leaders were tiered. The tiered system determines how much support is provided. The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership explained the tiering process and rationale further:

> One of the things that we did was we had developed a tier system of support. Each campus got tiered as either one, two, three, and four. Each of those levels had a different level of support that came with it. I mentioned before the mentor, the mentor was assigned for tier four campuses that really needed intensive support. We don't have personnel just laying around. So we've really focused on that. We recruited curriculum and instruction, and we had a periodic schedule depending on the tier in which they went and checked for alignment, checked for rigor, checked to ensure that we were teaching in accordance to our scope and sequence. And the pace was on the level. The work that the students were actually working on. And we provided feedback to the principals, but we

did this from a central office perspective, with a lens of support, never punitive. It's always about support.

In describing how the tiering process worked, an executive director of leadership development explained what support looked like for the principal on tier four of support:

> We tiered our campuses. We still do this today. One through four. Ones we see once a month, and they have different levels of support, at least once a month. The twos, we see about twice a month and they have different options of support. Threes, three times a month. She's a level four those first few years. And so she saw me every week, if not more. And so learning walks, putting systems in place, we are a strong PLC culture community. So to make sure alignment was tight, PLCs were tight. We started all that journey right around the time she became a comprehensive support [campus].

A principal described the support she received based on the tired system and when she was assigned a mentor:

> I had a mentor who would come work with me. A principal at a successful school would come work with me. I was allowed to go visit other schools, walk around with their principal, my mentor. I went to her campus several times, and I turned logs of those reflections and action steps after that.

She explained the addition of the mentor further:

> I don't think we ever had to have one of those until, you know, what happened happened. It's the thing that will not be named, you know, earning an F. But I don't know if anybody else ever had a mentor principal that they went to and they watched, and I was able to take what she had, you know, processes, she had been placed in systems and put them in

place here, and I was able to go into her school. So I don't know if that was done before. I had never done it before, so I'm not sure about that.

The data highlighted a strong connection to the literature and the theoretical framework outlined in the first chapter. Themes emerged supporting coherence between central office and campuses, using data to inform decision making, and differentiating support and resources based on campus needs. The final section examines barriers that were removed to support school turnaround.

Question three: What barriers were removed to facilitate academic improvement across the district?

The final research question sought to understand what barriers were removed at the central office level that led to school turnaround and improvement in campus letter grades. Data collected from participants revealed that some practices identified in improving campus letter grades were continuations of practices already in place while others were instituted as a result of school turnaround initiatives. Academic improvement was defined as improvement of letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system. Three practices were identified in the data: changing beliefs and fostering a positive mindset, reducing role ambiguity, and removing barriers to request support.

Changing beliefs and fostering a "this can be done" mindset. The data uncovered a significant change in mindset of what was possible. Participants described a certain resolve by central office that progress can be made and that central office leaders were there to support improvement efforts to meet the needs of students and improve campus letter grades. In

describing her appreciation for the support and the strong belief instilled by central office, a principal shared:

> I couldn't have made it without district level people. I would have never thought it was possible to go from an F to a B until the assistant superintendent came over who had done that, said it absolutely is possible to do that and put that thought in my mind that it was possible not to go up, but to go up really big.

The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership expanded on this from his perspective:

> I think the barrier here is the perception of those campuses that the kids couldn't do it, or our teachers can't do it. In the conversation about the leadership, those were the barriers. I will say a little bit of disappointment. People were let down because they never experienced IR campuses in this district before that year. So there were some people that were upset. Perceptions, attitudes, those were the biggest barriers. Me coming into the organization at that time was actually a breath of fresh air because I have been exposed to that in other districts. It wasn't the end of the world.

While describing the impact of her campus receiving an F-rating and additional requirements placed on her, along with the EDLD's strong belief in turning around the campus, a principal shared:

> It was very hurtful. It was embarrassing. It was shameful. But the district was behind me one hundred percent. My EDLD was new to me that year, but I knew from the minute she stepped on my campus that she believed that I could turn [the school] around; that I could put systems in place and ensure learning for all students was going on. It was

also important for principals to believe that students could achieve at high levels, especially for underperforming campuses with predominantly low-SES populations.

The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction described the importance of campus leaders believing that students were capable of achieving at high levels:

> The most impactful action we did [was] to make sure that those campuses were achieving at a higher level than where they were currently at was making a believer of the school principal that there was a problem at the campus. Because what we saw time and time again is at the helm of some of those campuses were principals who had the attitude of "these poor kids." And if the principal had the attitude that these poor kids, it was kind of like they're doing the best they can. And we had to break that paradigm because it's not these poor kids, it's these capable kids. What are these kids capable of? And so we had to make the principal a believer that student achievement and the way student achievement was measured is their responsibility, but it is the collective responsibility of the campus. That's what those kids deserve. Those kids deserve people, educators at all levels who believe in them. And so once we kind of got the principals of several of those campuses out of that mindset, and they saw that they could lead those improvement efforts and they were empowered to lead those improvement efforts. Then what we saw was that the campuses that turned around quickly, they took ownership of "I'm going to make a difference here."

The executive director of accountability recalled an early staff meeting where she noticed that several principals appeared dejected and defeated. She shared her response with a principal that seemed particularly down:

> We have never been there, so we didn't like to be there. I felt extremely sorry for those principals. And I remember watching their body language when we had our first staff meeting. I felt really sorry for them. I actually went over to one and told her to get her head up, stand up straight, take my hand, and we're going to get through this, you know, because they cared and they spent a lot of time and did a lot of great things.

Participants spoke about how going through school turnaround changed the mindsets of what is possible. Principals spoke of the growth their campuses went through and of their own personal growth as leaders as a result of experiencing school turnaround. A principal expanded on this further while reflecting on her journey:

> It just opened up a whole world for me, to get to just go walk other schools. I loved it. I started taking teachers with me, so teachers could see other teachers doing this. I cannot imagine being anywhere else and going through what we went through. It was hard, but there were people there that believed in me and supported me. I knew that the whole time. I couldn't have asked to be any more supported. My growth was celebrated. The growth in the scores were celebrated as we went. Like I said, I couldn't have asked for anything better from my district.

While analyzing the data, it was apparent that district-level participants recognized the mindset of the campus and campus leader was pivotal to turnaround the campus around and improved letter grades. Adopting a collective “we can do this” mindset from the campus and district level allowed campuses to refocus efforts and practices which led to significant improvements in student achievement and campus letter grades.

Reducing role ambiguity. As noted earlier in this chapter, participants uniformly perceived that EDLDs played a significant role in supporting campus turnaround efforts. The creation of the EDLD position, specifically the prioritized focus to support campuses and to build capacity in campus leaders, was a barrier the superintendent removed when he recreated the area operator position. The executive director of accountability, who had previously served as an area operator before the reorganization of the position, attributed much of their success to streamlined responsibilities and role clarity. She explained:

> I think the primary barrier probably was moving all of the non-instructional things to other departments and creating that other department. That was a big barrier change because that freed up those EDLDs to really concentrate on instruction and how well we were teaching kids within the classroom. So now they can do a lot of walkthroughs. They do a lot of walkthroughs with the principal and with the leadership team and have discussions around those, and they look for alignment. We had a lot of people working really hard that probably were not really aligned. Well, I know they weren't really aligned to what they needed to be doing.

The assistant superintendent of innovation and leadership emphasized the importance of clearly articulating the role and responsibilities of the EDLD position. He acknowledged that as their supervisor, he has to regularly protect their time to ensure schools and developing campus leaders remain the priority, adding:

> They strictly coach principals. Their number one priority is to coach principals. I always tell them, you can be part of this committee, but your number one job has to be taken care of. So if they can't make a meeting, don't make the meeting. Go support the principal.

> Principals are held in high regard in our district. And when they need assistance, they come first.

Role clarity also applied to other departments, to ensure responsibilities are clearly delineated. Departments are required to work with other departments to operate beyond team silos. The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction explained the process when describing the shift of responsibility in the EDLD role and defined the responsibilities of her department:

> They would do that in the olden days through administrative officers [area operators]. Now it's the executive director of leadership development. We have four. I'm just going to talk about curriculum and instruction because that's my area. We have an actual online, live [curriculum]. If teachers have concerns with curriculum, with our checkpoints, we have a Google Doc. They immediately fill out what their issue is. Why they don't think this answer is right, what you want to gripe about, just put it on the form for us. And then we follow up. And it's kind of the same thing with administrators. Administrators know if it's content related, they can go to that content person to ask those questions, those kinds of pieces that can go to the director of C&I to do those pieces. They can also ask me to do those pieces, but it really is about that ask. But in our system, it's also about the invite.

A principal expanded further, explaining whom she reaches out to for support, depending on the nature of the request:

> If I ever needed support from my executive director, I would just call or email her and then get that support. If I needed anything, as far as budget or finance, I would contact

> the assistant superintendent over that area. If I need support with administrative services, such as discipline, I contact the assistant superintendent over that or the director. Content level coordinators, just call her or email. And it's just amazing.

A different principal provided an additional perspective about the importance of a clear organizational structure when reaching out for additional support:

> The line that I call is usually my executive director or directors of various departments, and they are so accessible. So knowing that organizational structure and knowing who to call, if I do have a question is very important because I need an answer quickly because I'm running a campus, so I need those answers pretty quickly. So that organizational structure is very helpful to see who to call for what.

Restructuring the area operator position and clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the EDLD position led to greater role clarity and supported improvement efforts. Removing responsibilities that did not have a direct impact on school improvement practices allowed the EDLDs to prioritize and focus their work on supporting campuses based on needs. This shift led to higher levels of coherence between central office and campuses.

Just a phone call away. The absence of a bureaucratic process to request support from district personnel became evident while analyzing the data. Participants consistently stated that if they ever needed support, they would just pick up the phone or that support was "only a phone call away." Campus principals reported that they would reach out directly to the appropriate source to request support or to seek answers, regularly reaching out to assistant superintendents, executive directors, coordinators, and facilitators to get the needed help and answers. A principal noted that, "Sometimes I need to phone a friend, so it's so nice to know that those

assistant superintendents, deputy superintendent, even the superintendent is right there when we need it. I have their cell numbers. I can reach them at any time." Another principal added:

> I always appreciate the way that our superintendent and deputy superintendent and assistant superintendents really focus on what they can do to help the campuses because we're the point of need with the staff, the students and the parents. And they are literally just a phone call or text away if we need them. And I think just that level of support and just how they are there.

Another principal shared similar experiences, adding:

> All I had to do was pick up the phone. I would call our curriculum people and say, I need John, who is our science person. I would just say, I need, and they were here. They were like, "when can you meet with them?" And they would be here after school, which is prime time. So the teachers don't miss time teaching class, they were able to come. Then they were like, "when is that grade level planning period? We can come back." You know, just [campuses] being made a priority I think.

The executive director of accountability provided more insight about how comfortable campus principals and department personnel were with reaching out to each other for support. She attributed the comfort level to the familiarity staff have with each other. Responding to how principals reach out for support, she shared:

> They reach out directly, if they choose to, or, it could come through their EDLD, or it could come through me, looking at data. We don't necessarily have a process where we limit that. Things can kind of fall through the cracks if you are not comfortable reaching out. So I think the fact that our district is so, you know, sometimes your greatest strength

> is also some of your greatest weaknesses. We have been a hire-from-within district for years and years and years. We do more outside hiring now than we used to, but the fact that there's so many people who've been here so long and know each other so well, they're very comfortable reaching out to each other.

Knowing and trusting each other was also a core component of accessibility throughout the district. A principal expanded on this familiarity and trust, adding:

> I can just text or pick up the phone and call. They were my go-to. Back to trust, right? There's five facets of trust by Shannon Moran and because there was trust there, I felt comfortable saying I need this. The fact that I have their phone number and their email address, and I know their direct extension. In a large district it is important. And, because that trust was built, I could pick up the phone and call without hesitation at any point in time to ask for whatever I needed.

The district's culture of trust and ownership fostered an environment where campuses could reach out directly to central office leaders to request support. This streamlined process eliminated bureaucratic and inefficient processes that often exist in large organizations.

Summary

West Central ISD, a diverse community, served approximately 40,000 students with 78% of students coming from economically disadvantaged households during the 2018-2019 school year. WCISD was one of three districts in the state with a population of at least 40,000 students that made double-digit gains in the percentage of schools that improved D and F letter grades. The purpose of this study was to examine the specific structures and systems that were implemented at the district level that supported academic improvement of D and F-rated

campuses. Chapter four included findings of what WCISD campus and district leaders attributed gains to by looking through the construct of each interview question. An analysis of the data revealed major themes and their relation to the conceptual framework outlined in chapter one. With the exception of one overarching theme of an ownership culture, themes were organized under each research question.

Data collected revealed key practices taken at the central office level that were perceived to have led to improved letter grades for campuses. Participants clearly and repeatedly acknowledged that improvements would not have been possible without the support and systems implemented at the central office level. Data revealed that much of the progress was attributed to high levels of coherence between the central office and campuses, a commitment to building instructional leadership capacity in campus and district leaders, and how the district prioritized support structures based on the needs of campuses and their leaders. Chapter five provides a brief overview of this study, summarizes findings while making connections to the conceptual framework and prior research, and provides clarity of findings and implications for practice and for future studies.

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, implications, and recommendations that resulted from this case study. A conceptual framework is provided to connect the findings of this study to district practices and systems identified in other studies. This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the study, including reiteration of the problem, purpose, research questions, and methodology used in the study. The second section includes a summary of the findings, organized by research questions and connected to the literature. The second section also includes propositions advanced by the data from the study. The third section includes implications for practice and recommendations for further research inquiry.

Summary of Literature

Although there has been a concerted effort to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools with the passage of federal and state policies and increased accountability and transparency in new school rating systems, many schools, especially in poor communities, are still failing. One of the challenges that makes school turnaround so difficult to implement is the fact that the majority of failing schools in urban school systems are in poor, minority communities that lack resources and consistent support systems. These schools face systemic challenges such as high teacher turnover and schools staffed with inexperienced or underqualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Lester, 2018). Calkins et al. (2007) have called for systemic and cultural change where leaders are "given the flexibility, resources, and support that teachers and administrators are calling for" to lead to real and long-term change (p.

4). Without district-level systemic changes, schools will continue to struggle, and there will be no long-term solution or real improvement in school turnaround practices.

School turnaround has been a popular topic in school reform efforts for decades, but until recently, the majority of studies have focused on school-level turnaround efforts. If campus-level initiatives were adequate in turning around schools, these underperforming campuses would have demonstrated improvement long before now. Recent studies have highlighted the important role district-level systems and practices play in turning around the lowest-performing schools (Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009). Although there is much research demonstrating that some historically low-performing campuses are beating the odds to quickly improve, those examples are relatively isolated. Real, long-term solutions to address enduring school turnaround require a district-level response. Although studies have clearly identified campus and district practices that have led to positive academic outcomes at low-performing schools, there is still no clear blueprint for central office staff to implement that will lead to wide-scale systemic change. Case study research has highlighted some consistent district-wide practices that have yielded improved academic performance at the campus-level (Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009), but the research examining specific central office practices is still limited.

Additionally, considering that the 2019-2020 school year marked only the second year of Texas' A-F school accountability system, there are gaps in the research that demonstrate how the new system has impacted school turnaround efforts at the central office level due to the short timeframe of implementation. As the seventeenth state to implement a school rating system that assigns letter grades, Texas is the largest state to adopt a system that assigns a single letter grade

to its schools. Well before the A-F rating system, there was already significant pressure for school districts to turnaround their lowest performing schools. The increased transparency and simple evaluation metric of A-F has only intensified that pressure. Perceptions abound that A and B-rated campuses are good schools and that D and F-rated campuses are bad schools. As these influences continue to mount, especially for those schools and districts that earn D and F ratings, it is important to understand how those influences impact the perceptions, responses, and actions of district central office leadership and staff. District leaders need to understand how to adequately respond in order to refine systems and provide support structures to improve the lowest-performing schools that serve the neediest students: economically-disadvantaged children, English language learners, and students who represent minority populations. These groups are an expanding population in Texas, one of the fastest growing states in the country (World Population Review, 2020). Potter and Hoque (2014) stated that, "projections suggest the Hispanic population will more than double its size in 2010 to over 20 million by 2050. The non-Hispanic Black population is also projected to double in size, growing to over 6 million by 2050" (p. 4). Population and demographic projections are vital in light of the fact that the vast majority of students attending chronically low-performing schools are made up of minority students, many of whom are also English language learners (Le Floch, 2015), adding to the urgency of taking action to turnaround chronically unsuccessful schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perceptions of campus and district leaders about what specific factors led to substantially improved academic achievement and campus rating letter grades. This study investigated the organizational structures and practices at

the district level and what participants perceived to have had the greatest impact on turnaround efforts and improved letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system. The pressure to improve student outcomes in the state's accountability system that assigns scores and letter grades can provide opportunities for district leaders to evaluate what structural or organizational changes are required for substantial academic increases and improvements in campus and district rating letter grades. This study provides a framework of practices and/or structures for other district leaders to reference as they make adjustments to their systems and practices to turn around the lowest-performing schools.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study focused on gaining an understanding of what district and campus leaders perceived to have had the greatest impact on quickly turning around the lowest-performing schools and improving campus letter grades. By answering the following three questions, this study sought to identify specific district-level structures, systems, and practices that can enhance the growing body of research on successful school turnaround:

1. What role do cabinet-level administrators and district directors play in improving and sustaining overall campus letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
2. What systems and structures were created at the cabinet or director level to improve and sustain overall letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system?
3. What barriers were removed to facilitate academic improvement across the district?

Summary of the Methodology

This study relied on a single case study design, analyzing what systems and structures were in place in an urban district in Texas that transformed its lowest-performing schools. The

case study design allowed the researcher to understand the lived experiences of participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Following a phenomenological approach, the researcher sought to understand the perceptions and perspectives participants attributed to the phenomenon of improved academic outcomes and campus letter grades. However, it is also important to note that participants come with their own beliefs and individual perspectives; accepting multiple perspectives through a holistic process is essential (Goldkuhl, 2012).

This study relied on a purposeful selection process that deliberately identified an urban school district that yielded extraordinary results when compared to similar districts to illuminate the differences in structures and practices. Turnaround campuses for this study were defined as campuses that improved D or F ratings to a C or higher and maintained the improved letter grade the following year. The case study site was a district that met the following criteria: a population of at least 40,000 students, an economically disadvantaged student body percentage consistent with state averages of 60% or more, and ratings that placed the district in the top 10% of districts that improved D and F-rated campuses to C or higher rating letter grades. The purposeful selection process included the identification of district interview participants who had been in the district for at least two years and were part of the school turnaround process. Participants were identified through a selective referral process to ensure that those working most closely with school turnaround efforts were included in the study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased demands on campus and district leaders, this study was limited to seven participants: three campus principals and four central office staff.

Data were collected in semi-structured interviews, where interviews were recorded and coded using software. Interview questions were tailored to solicit clarification from participants

while providing enough structure to ensure responses were organized in such a way that they adequately capture various perspectives. Participants completed two 60-minute semi-structured interviews. The first interview relied on open-ended responses to interview questions. The second interview was designed to allow participants time to reflect on responses from the first interview and respond to probing questions developed after the first round. The two-round interview structure was designed to help the researcher ask clarifying or probing questions and to ensure participant responses were not misrepresented. Data were transcribed and coded, which revealed major themes that were organized under each research question. Three coding processes were used to code transcripts and archival documents: initial coding, process coding, and focused coding. The initial two steps led to a wide range of codes that helped capture identifiable actions or practices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The final step of the coding process allowed the researcher to compare new codes across participants and identify consistent themes (Saldana, 2016).

Conceptual Framework Review

This study utilized a conceptual framework based on existing research on the impact of campus and district practices that support effective school turnaround efforts. For the purpose of this study, the conceptual framework associated with district-level practices was used as a starting point to examine more closely the specific district systems and structures that were established to turnaround schools in Texas' A-F accountability system. The framework emphasized impactful district-level practices that included strategic staffing and restructuring, ensuring a quality curriculum, adjusted resource allocation practices, evidence-based decision

making, and strong coherence between central offices and campuses (DeVita et al., 2007; Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2016; Zavadsky, 2009).

Although data could be linked to campus-level practices, such as data-driven instructional practices, a strong vision and mission, and building teacher capacity, the purpose of this study was to focus on district-level practices. While the findings mirrored the conceptual framework for district-level factors, specifically the importance of having strong coherence between central offices and campuses, adjusted resource allocations based on campus needs, and evidence-based decision making, other specific factors emerged, namely the focus on developing an ownership culture and a high level of coherence between district and campus leadership.

Summary of Findings

This section provides a summary of findings, organized by each research question, and connections to the literature. The findings build on previous research of those district-level systems and practices that led to quick and sustained turnaround.

Cabinet-level administrator and district director roles improved and sustained overall campus letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system. Results from this study were consistent with the growing body of research confirming the vital role central offices and district leadership have in turning around the lowest-performing schools in the system (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003; Meyers & Smylie, 2017). Broody (2011) maintained that, "Successful school turnaround also requires district turnaround—fundamental changes in the way that districts think about and provide support for schools" (p. 1). Campus principals attributed much of their success and improvement to the support they received from central office, indicating that central office played a pivotal role in improving campus letter grades. According to Mac Iver and

Farley (2003), "Despite the much-heralded success stories of individual schools, most (especially those serving low-income populations) cannot improve instruction and achievement without some outside help, whether from the district office or some other external partner" (p. 24). The research revealed that district leaders were committed to supporting campuses, and much of that support relied on sufficiently identifying what specific assistance campuses needed to improve. Myers and Symlie (2017) underscored the importance of a carefully planned and articulated district response, stating:

> Turnaround requires not only intensity but also clearly delineated purpose and an efficacious theory of organization improvement that recognizes context, understands root causes of decline and failure, systemically addresses areas of need without neglecting areas of success, and builds resolve for long-term organizational change (p. 517).

In order for districts to support school turnaround efforts, district-level support plans need to mirror the unique needs of the campuses receiving the support, and this key facet of school turnaround was evidenced in participant responses.

Starting with the superintendent, WCISD empowered principals by creating an ownership culture and instilling certain levels of autonomy and accountability for campus leaders and throughout the system. Autonomy was possible because of significant investments from the central office to develop campus leaders and build instructional leadership capacity throughout the organization. According to Honig et al. (2010), "Districts generally do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement" (p. 5). Data collected suggested that

WCISD engaged with schools and school leaders, making a concentrated effort to build leadership capacity and ownership across the system.

The superintendent's commitment to developing and fostering an ownership culture resonated throughout this study. His compliance versus ownership culture treatise clearly outlined his belief that a compliance culture is one of the reasons prohibiting school improvement, sharing:

> The impact of this compliance-based systems thinking has not only been seen in overall student performance flat-lining, but we are also seeing very concerning levels of teacher dissatisfaction, a lack of movement in the advanced performance of students across the system (WCISD Website).

Evidence of this cultural shift from compliance to ownership was found throughout this study, impacting almost every aspect of the findings. This ownership culture included high levels of leadership autonomy, accountability, and increased monitoring with an "eyes on" approach. Building this culture related directly to the creation of the EDLD role, investments made in building leadership capacity throughout the system, and adjustments made to the Data Assistance Team (DAT) meeting process. In discussing how one urban district found high-levels of success when implementing a distributed leadership model, the Hanover Research Group (2013) contended that, "Unlike a traditional hierarchical model of leadership, a distributive approach engages individuals at all levels of an organization in the decision-making process" and added that distributive leadership "is a critical element of many successful school reform initiatives" (p. 15). Through the superintendent's messaging, the philosophy of distributive leadership became

the foundation for operations and decision making, creating a strong platform for academic improvement at low-performing schools.

Systems and structures created at the cabinet or director level to improve and sustain overall letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system. Results from this study suggested that three general systems or structures were put in place at the district-level that led to improved student performance and letter grades in Texas' A-F accountability system. These included restructuring the principal supervisor role and providing role clarity, evidence-based decision-making structures, and a fluid system to allocate support based on campus needs.

When the superintendent arrived in the district, one of the first changes made was restructuring the principal supervisor role. At the time, area operators supervised principals, but they also supervised departments and handled parent complaints and grievance processes. This restructure redefined the role and changed the position to an executive director of leadership development, with the primary focus of building leadership capacity by coaching and supporting campus principals. This shift not only provided a clear scope of responsibility and narrowed the role of the EDLD, but it also provided greater coherence between central office and campuses. Honig et al. (2010) contended that, "a clear hallmark of the central office transformation efforts involved these dedicated central office administrators focusing on strengthening the capacity of school principals for instructional leadership" (p. 26). Research has suggested that this transformation and focus on building leadership capacity at the campus level is a core component of school turnaround (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018, Honig et al., 2010, Johnson et al., 2015).

The district had adopted an evidence-based decision-making process well before turnaround efforts were initiated, but changes were made to the system to provide more

autonomy and ownership to campus principals. DATs meet after each District Checkpoint (DCP) assessment, which occurs each nine-week cycle, to analyze data and develop support plans. The importance of the district collecting and analyzing data to allocate central office support is consistent with the research on the role district-level staff play in helping stakeholders make informed decisions (Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009). While describing findings from extensive case study research, Johnson et al. (2010) found that, "The best systems provided users with multiple data points on student achievement, student demographics, and other record data (attendance, discipline referrals, etc.) through multiple years" (p. 264). Johnson et al. (2010) also pointed out that, "In addition to having powerful data management systems, the districts also developed data collection tools to provide ongoing systemic feedback on student progress." (p. 265). WCISD's use of DCP assessments and the structure of the DAT allowed district leaders to closely monitor and respond to underperformance quickly, allocating support based on campus needs, using a just-in-time approach to improving achievement.

These data systems allowed WCISD to be nimble and responsive to campus needs. Instead of applying a uniform response, the district was able to provide differentiated support based on campus data in a fluid and ongoing process. The tiering of campuses and principals also allowed district personnel to maximize resources and provide an appropriate, timely response. According to existing research, differentiating support for individual campuses or principals has been vital for school improvement, and moves beyond a one-size-fits-all approach (Honig et al., 2010).

Barriers removed to facilitate academic improvement across the district. Participants reiterated the importance of changing beliefs to include that the turnaround was

possible in the first place. From changing the mindset of the campus principal that turnaround was possible within a short timeline, to instilling a belief that all students can achieve at high levels, removing the barriers associated with beliefs and mindsets was vital to turnaround success. According to previous research, low-performing schools are often staffed with teachers and principals that feel that students are incapable of performing at high levels and that low performance is imminent (DeVita et al., 2007; Rihm, 2007). However, case study research has shown that increasing commitment of staff and instilling a belief that turnaround is possible has proven that changing mindsets has led to effective turnaround (Herman et al., 2008).

Another barrier identified by participants is rooted in role clarity and the restructuring of the EDLD position. All participants acknowledged the importance of redefining the role and removing other responsibilities in order to focus on building instructional capacity in campus principals. The restructure also included restaffing three of the four EDLD positions with three successful district principals that were promoted based on successful experiences leading campuses. The shift in staffing marked a new direction for the role, where the primary focus of the EDLD position became building capacity and supporting campus principals. Expanding on the importance of the principal supervisor role, Bambrick-Santoyo (2018) pointed out:

> Just as student learning won't change if we don't improve instruction, our work as principal managers won't change until we make the shift beom being administrators to serving as instructional leaders. Why? Because at its core, being an instructional leader means believing that principals can get better. They aren't born great; they can grow into becoming great. This entails a paradigm shift: moving monitoring or evaluating school leaders to coaching them (p. 3).

Removing responsibilities not directly connected to campuses allowed the EDLDs to focus solely on instructional leadership and building the capacity of the campus leader. The success of this change was evident in the fact that all turnaround occurred with the same campus leadership, with the exception of one principal who was replaced.

Other barriers removed involved communication and practices in place to request additional support when needed. Removing bureaucratic barriers for support requests and a communication path to do so led to a streamlined process where campus principals or district-level directors working directly with campuses received the support or communication they needed in an efficient manner. The campus principals indicated that they could reach out to anyone within the system directly to request support or information, from the deputy and assistant superintendents to coordinator or facilitators. They attributed their ability to reach out for support at multiple levels to a strong sense of community and trust within the organization. Through extensive case study research, Zavadsky (2010) reported:

> When we asked district leaders about the district climate, many of them mentioned trust, mutual respect, teamwork, stability, excitement, and a strong commitment to students. District leaders frequently talked about the importance of relationships at all levels within the district and described working hard to make close connections with each other and with schools (p. 278).

Participants attributed this strong sense of community, trust, and relationships, in part to WCISD being a hire-from-within district, where the vast majority of the principals and central office staff have lived and worked in the community for most of their personal and professional lives. Unlike the common characteristic of low-performing turnaround schools and systems having

high levels of staff turnover (Calkins et al., 2007, Le Floch, 2015, Kutash et al., 2010), WCISD has a long history of developing leadership capacity and promoting leaders from within the organization. Campus principals and central office personnel have known each other and worked beside each other for many years, and turnover in district leadership is low.

Conceptual Framework Connections

The conceptual framework outlined in chapter one provided a starting point for this study and anchored this research in practices already identified in previous research. Emerging from this study were specific district-level practices that fall under the following district-level systems and structures identified in the conceptual framework: coherence between central office and campuses, evidence-based decision making, adjusted resource allocations, and strategic staffing and restructuring. The following section connects the findings in this study and existing research outlined in the conceptual frame.

Coherence between central office and campuses. Previous studies highlighted the importance of strong coherence between central offices and campuses, noting that doing so is more challenging in larger districts (Honig et al., 2010); Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009). These same studies and others magnified the importance of the intermediary role, referred to in the research as instructional leadership directors (ILDs), that coordinate work between central office and campuses by developing strong partnerships and aligning practices (Honig et al., 2010). In WCISD, this intermediary role was the EDLD whose primary responsibility was to build leadership capacity and support principals and campuses. Removing other responsibilities from this intermediary position to ensure a focus on work with principals is one of the specific practices identified in prior research. Although there were no consistent formula or optimum

ratio recommendations in the literature, WCISD clearly delineated a target that 75% of EDLD time was to be spent on campuses working with principals.

Another key component related to central office and campus coherence was the importance of the larger system, not the ILD or EDLD alone, also holding principals accountable for improving school performance. WCISD's commitment to fostering an ownership culture demonstrated evidence that there were high levels of accountability at all levels of the organization. The "eyes on" approach and data practices that were in place provided additional evidence of the system holding principals and their leadership teams accountable for improving school performance. Although the EDLD and DCSI attended each DAT meeting for priority campuses, the principal had the freedom to invite other central office personnel as deemed necessary to improve achievement.

Evidence-based decision making. Another connection made to previous research involved the systems created that resulted in evidence-based decision making. The literature included a wide-range of considerations that included how districts determine what programs to adopt or eliminate or how to reallocate personnel (DeVita et al., 2007; Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Schmoker, 2016; Zavadsky, 2009). There were two primary systems in place used to determine where to allocate additional support. The first was the DCP process, where campuses took assessments each nine-week cycle, with results shared across the district, comparing and ranking school performance. The district had eyes on the data, constantly tiering campuses in order to allocate appropriate support personnel based on the needs identified in the data. Although the district's ownership culture places ownership with the campus principal and

leadership team, central office personnel also closely monitored the data to make sure nothing was overlooked.

The second system involved an "eyes on" approach, where the EDLDs and DCSI were regularly on campuses to collect evidence of how improvement plans were being implemented. Commonly referred to as evidence of impact, EDLDs regularly asked principals about evidence of impact to determine if actions resulted in verifiable improvement in student achievement and/or changes in adult behavior.

Adjusted resource allocations. Another connection to the conceptual framework involved adjustments to resources and support based on need. Although previous studies highlighted how districts adjusted funding formulas or adjusted resources for historically low-performing turnaround campuses (Baroody, Rho, & Huberlie 2015; Johnson et al., 2015), WCISD allocated additional support personnel to either plan with teacher teams, provide additional professional development, coach teachers, model lessons, and more. WCISD's system to differentiate support involved a tiering process where campuses were ranked and tiered based on performance on DCP assessments. EDLDs increased the frequency of coaching visits, collaborative walks, and professional development in order to build leadership capacity based on campus needs. The system involved a fluid and responsive process where EDLDs and other central office staff consistently monitored and adjusted campus support according to the data. WCISD also utilized district-alloted State Compensatory Education (SCE) funding to support initiatives at priority campuses.

Strategic staffing and restructuring. Additional research included in the conceptual framework involved district-level practices that improved campus improvement and highlighted

the importance of schools requiring highly effective staff. Numerous studies have examined the role strong teachers and campus principals play in school improvement and how districts have strategically staffed those schools to support school turnaround efforts (Baroody, 2011; Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015, Meyers and Smylie, 2017). Unlike districts that strategically staffed campuses with the strongest principals and best teachers, WCISD's support model did not include strategically placing staff at select turnaround campuses. However, the district did restructure at the central office level to better support campuses and campus leaders. The EDLD role was restructured, changing from an area operator role, which had other responsibilities beyond supervising schools, to a much more focused role to support campuses and build leadership capacity. Narrowing the scope of the position by clearly delineating the work of the EDLD position was a significant change to the organizational structure of the school system, creating success at the campus level without having to make staffing changes.

Ensuring a Quality Curriculum. The final tenet included in the conceptual framework of district-level practices was the assurance of a quality curriculum. De Vita et al. (2017) noted the importance of providing a quality curriculum for low-performing turnaround campuses that are consistently found in poor communities and often comprised of students of color. Other research found the correlations between high levels of academic performance and districts with a robust and uniform curriculum (Johnson et al., 2015; Leithwood, 1010; Schmoker, 2018). While this study did not identify ensuring a quality curriculum as a core component of district-level turnaround practices, several interview participants did touch on the fact that they felt that the curriculum supported academic improvements. It is also important to note that the DCP assessments were aligned with the curriculum and supported decision making for additional

support the district provided to campuses. Additionally, the few times that curriculum was mentioned in interview responses, it was always referenced through a positive lens and was never viewed as a barrier.

Propositions

The following propositions are advanced based on the findings of this study:

- Strong unity, coherence, and trust between central offices and campuses are vital to effective school turnaround practices.
- A more defined intermediary role that prioritizes developing principal leadership capacity, often the principal supervisor, is necessary for effective school turnaround.
- Clear and consistent district practices for monitoring and responding to campus-level data is a foundational component for successful school turnaround.
- A strong ownership culture fosters an environment of shared responsibility and accountability throughout the organization, leading to high levels of autonomy and efficacy.
- Building instructional leadership capacity at all levels of the organization is imperative for school improvement and turnaround.

Implications for Practice

Stakes continue to rise for Texas public schools and districts to improve campus letter grades in the state's A-F accountability systems, especially for historically low-performing campuses that earn D or F letter grades. An examination of the specific adjustments that were made to district systems and structures towards improvement can provide models for other districts across the state to replicate. This study reinforced existing literature about the impact of

district-level systems and identified unique practices which led to improved academic performance and higher campus letter grades.

Data collected throughout this study underscored the importance of having clearly defined and consistent systems in place at the central office level. The importance of clearly defined systems is magnified in districts that value principal autonomy. While autonomy was highly valued by participants, it was clear that having structures in the system to support that autonomy was equally important. A lack of clarity in the system or inconsistent, broken support structures undermine autonomy, resulting in confusion or worse, chaos. Finding the balance between autonomy, accountability, and ultimately, ownership was a key driver of campus and district success in this study and is well worth further examination by district leaders across the state and nationally as a model for school turnaround, as well as for lessons in developing a healthy district culture.

The findings of this study contribute to research examining specific district-level structures and systems in place to support school improvement efforts. Specifically, this study examined how one district positioned its central office to support school improvement efforts and improve campus letter grade ratings for its underperforming campuses. The following general implications for practice were identified:

1. District leaders can use this study to help refine district-level systems to improve communications between central office and campuses. By examining current systems, districts can remove potential obstacles that may inhibit clear and consistent communication to support campuses.

2. District leaders can use this study to restructure the role of the principal supervisor and provide greater role clarity. Removing other responsibilities that are not directly connected to building leadership capacity or supporting campus leadership leads to greater coherence between central office and campuses.
3. Superintendents can use this study to help understand how they can develop an ownership culture and adopt practices to support a distributive leadership model to improve academic outcomes at the campus level.

Direct implications for superintendents as a result of this data include a well-communicated vision and mission that underscore the importance of believing that all students can achieve. Every adult interviewed echoed the importance of this mindset in turnaround success and the leadership of the superintendent being paramount to its creation and dissemination. Additionally, communication between all levels in discussions and agreement about data, decision making, actions to be taken, and addressing needs for support are key elements that district leaders must plan for, check for, and consistently reinforce for successful turnaround. Superintendents must not only model that type of ongoing, two-way dialogue with cabinet members, district directors, and with principals, but they should ensure that there are systems in place that provide multiple opportunities for that communication to occur, including committees such as the DAT that meet regularly, and requirements that district leadership response time to campus communication and requests is reasonable and prompt. Another implication for superintendents is the need to clarify roles for central office staff and campus principals. Transparency about role expectations, such as those outlined in the WCISD superintendent web article, made it clear the job role of the EDLD was to work with campuses,

first and foremost. This clarification of role responsibility can assist superintendents with ensuring that there are no gaps in campus support in terms of principal professional development, student progress, and resources. As role clarity is tied to staff goals and evaluations, it can be even more powerful in supporting progress and increased student achievement. This is vital in both short-term and long-term success.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perceptions of campus and district leaders about specific factors that led to quick and sustainable turnaround in Texas' A-F accountability system. Although an abundance of research has been conducted that reveals what successful schools have done to quickly turnaround school performance, evidence of how districts purposefully structure support systems at the central office level to turnaround the lowest-performing schools remains limited. Findings of this study magnified and expanded on the previous research on the structures and systems that were in place at the top of the organization that positively impacted academic improvements and school turnaround efforts (Honig et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015; Zavadsky, 2009). This study highlighted distinct structures and systems in place at the district level in one Texas school district that led to significant improvement in campus letter grades and academic performance with its lowest performing schools. The findings resulted in the following recommendations for further study:

- Expand study participation to include historically high-performing school districts with no D or F-rated campuses to examine what specific practices and systems are in place at the central office level that impact campus performance.

- Expand participation to include smaller districts with populations less than 40,000 students to examine how the size of the district impacts the systems and structures employed at the top of the organization.
- Include teacher perceptions concerning district support of their work in improving academic outcomes for students that led to school turnaround.
- Examine how central office structures and systems impact other aspects of school effectiveness beyond academic accountability.

Conclusion

If campuses had the resources and ability to turnaround low achievement without district-level support, the vast majority of those campuses would not continue to be rated as underperforming. It is no secret that the lowest-performing schools in urban school systems share strikingly similar characteristics, with the majority of those schools serving mostly poor, minority students. These schools are often staffed with ineffective leaders and inexperienced teachers and lack the necessary support systems to make essential improvements. As pressure from the state's A-F accountability system continues to mount, especially for district and campus leaders working with low-performing D or F-rated campuses, it is important to understand how structures and systems at the top of the organization can effectively support and improve campus letter grades.

This study expanded on current research, shining a light on what specific district systems were implemented that positively impacted school turnaround efforts. As others have suggested, an understanding of optimal systems and practices in place at the district level can have a significant impact on improvement and turnaround efforts at the campus level. Specifically, this

study uncovered the importance of removing the bureaucratic barriers that can impede improvement efforts that are often pushed down from central office. Fostering a strong coherence between central office and campuses by investing in intermediary positions, along with clear and efficient means to communicate information and for campus leaders to request support, is germane to removing those bureaucratic barriers. Additionally, collecting and analyzing evidence from district assessments allows central office staff to provide differentiated support based on campus needs. Moreover, a reinforced culture of ownership and a collective "eyes on" approach with stakeholders at all levels of the organization held equally accountable for results, provided further examples of district practices that positively impact campus outcomes. And most importantly, at all levels of the organization, staff must have a strong shared belief that all students can perform at equally high levels and that turnaround is possible.

Appendices

Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Background questions:

1. Can you tell me about your work history working in WCISD?
2. How long have you been working in your current role? What are your primary responsibilities?
3. Can you describe the previous positions you have held in education?

Guided interview questions:

1. How long have you been working in your current role?
2. What strategies were implemented to improve academic outcomes?
3. What do you perceive were the most impactful actions taken at the campus level to support turnaround efforts and improve student academic performance?
4. What do you perceive were the most impactful actions taken at the district-level that effectively supported turnaround efforts and led to improved student performance?
5. What strategies were taken that you perceive were unsuccessful in supporting school turnaround?
6. What were the greatest barriers to be removed in order to lead a successful school turnaround?
7. What systems were in place for you to request additional support when you needed it?
8. What would you change about the current systems to make the turnaround process more efficient and productive?
9. Did you reach out to others for support? If so, to whom did you reach out? If not, why did you not ask for support?

10. What role did your immediate supervisor play in supporting you and school turnaround at your campus? (principals only)
11. What recommendations would you give district leadership about supporting school turnaround efforts?
12. What systems were in place to evaluate effectiveness?
    a. Campus level?
    b. District department level?
13. Did you feel that the central office adequately supported campus turnaround efforts? If so, what specifically did that support look like? If not, what was missing or what could have been provided?
14. What was your involvement in the decision-making process as systems were developed and implemented to support turnaround initiatives? How were data and ongoing feedback utilized to make any necessary adjustments to systems and/or processes?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in either leading or supporting successful school turnaround efforts?

Appendix B
Site Agreement Letter

Superintendent
Deputy Superintendent
District ISD
Address
City, TX Zip Code

November 5, 2020

Dear Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent:

I am conducting research on the perceptions of district leaders of systems that have led to rapid and sustainable change in Texas' A-F accountability system. This study aims to identify specific systems and structures that resulted in improved letter grades for low-performing campuses. Initial research indicates that _____ ISD is an outlier across the state for quickly improving campus letter grades within this new system. I believe that the information gleaned in this study, based on your district's work, has the potential to influence the academic success of students and schools across the state.

The purpose of this email is to request the district's participation in the research study to identify the key structures and systems that led to _____ ISD's improvement in overall campus letter grades. By participating in this study, the district will contribute research that highlights the characteristics of effective district-level practices that positively impacted student achievement in high poverty, underperforming schools.

With your approval, I hope to collect data via two interviews with campus principals and district leaders involved in school turnaround. The attached information sheet provides added details about the study. Participation is confidential, and identifying information about the district, campuses, and any campus/district leaders will be redacted.

I currently serve as an area director in Garland ISD and supervise 16 principals, 12 of which are leading school improvement efforts at low-performing or critical campuses. I know the daily challenges they face, and I understand that the COVID-19 pandemic has added additional stress for all administrators, especially campus and district leaders charged with supporting students and teachers at the campus level. If approved, I would be sensitive to the current circumstances and would work closely with participants to ensure minimal disruption to their already busy schedules.

I completed _____ISD's External Research Request for Access Form, and I am available to discuss any questions you may have at your convenience. I can be contacted at 214-XXX-XXX, and my email is jasonmadam2@gmail.com. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jason Adams
Doctoral Candidate in the Cooperative Superintendency Program
The University of Texas at Austin

Appendix C
Informed Consent Letter

Dear Prospective Participant:

You are invited to participate in a study on school turnaround in Texas' A-F accountability system and the perceptions of district leaders of systems that led to rapid and sustainable change in _____ ISD. I am contacting you because your district has given approval for this research project. My name is Jason Adams, and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin in the Educational Leadership and Policy Department and a fellow in the Cooperative Superintendency Program (CSP). This research project is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my doctoral dissertation.

The purpose of this case study is to examine the perceptions of campus and district leaders about what specific factors led to quick and sustainable turnaround in their districts. This qualitative study will investigate the organizational structures and support systems that school and district leaders perceive to have had the greatest impact on turnaround efforts and sustained academic achievement in an A-F accountability system.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews over the next two months. Interviews will take place either in person or by video conferencing, per your preference. Interviews will follow an open-ended questionnaire and will be audio recorded over a period of approximately one hour. You will not be identified or identifiable in any reports associated with this research. During the data analysis process, you will be assigned a number code or pseudonym. You and your district will not be identified or identifiable in the final dissertation or any other publications associated with this research. After two years, the digital interview recordings and transcribed data will be deleted.

By agreeing to participate in this study and signing a consent form, you will be giving your consent for the researcher to include your responses in his data analysis after you have reviewed a transcript of your responses for accuracy. The consent form will be provided prior to the interview, and after reading it, you may consent by signing it. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time.

By participating in this study, you will contribute to the current literature on school turnaround in newly adopted A-F accountability systems. No compensation will be offered for your participation. If you have any questions about this study, please email at jasonmadam2@gmail.com or my dissertation chair, Dr. Pedro Reyes, at preyes@austin.utexas.edu. Any questions about the research can also be directed to the university's Office of Research Support at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Please respond to this email to confirm that you are willing to participate in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jason Adams
Doctoral Candidate in the Cooperative Superintendency Program
The University of Texas at Austin

Appendix D
Consent for Participation in Research Form

Title: School Turnaround in Texas' A-F System: Perceptions from District Leaders of Systems that Lead to Rapid and Sustainable Change in Urban School Districts

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate in this study. This form will be used to record your consent if you choose to participate.

Purpose of the Study
You have been asked to participate in a research study about the experiences of campus and district leaders in leading school turnaround efforts. The purpose of this case study is to examine the perceptions of campus and district leaders about what specific factors have led to quick and sustainable turnaround in their districts. This qualitative study will investigate the organizational structures and support systems that school and district leaders perceive to have had the greatest impact on turnaround efforts and sustained academic achievement in an A-F accountability system.

What will you be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an in-depth interview
- Review transcribed data from the interview and participate in a follow-up interview to expand on your initial responses or provide clarification

Interviews will take place either face-to-face or via video conferencing and will last approximately 60-minutes in length. The study will include up to 12 study participants. Participation will be audio recorded. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, findings of this study may generate a template for urban districts to consider when determining optional structures and supports to rapidly increase and sustain performance at historically low-performing schools identified in Texas' A-F accountability system.

Do you have to participate?
No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin in any way. If you choose to participate, please sign and return this form to the researcher. You may reach out by emailing jasonmadam2@gmail.com and or calling at 214-XXX-XXX. Alternatively, you may mail the form to Jason Adams, 8939 Eustis Avenue, Dallas, TX. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation for participation?
You will not receive any type of payment for participating in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?
Your privacy and the confidentiality of your data will be protected. You will be given a neutral alias, and no information you share to other participants will be disclosed, ensuring the details of the data cannot be traced to participants. All data will be locked in a secure location.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your data will not be released without your consent unless required by law or court order. The data, which will be masked, resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you or with your participation in any study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for two years and then erased.

Whom do I contact with questions about the study?
You can contact the researcher prior, during, or after participating in the study at jasonmadam2@gmail.com or at 214-XXX-XXXX.

Whom do I contact with questions concerning my rights as a research participant?
You can contact, anonymously if you wish, the University of Texas Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471- 8871 or by email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu with questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study.

Participation
You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and risks involved in this research study.

_____
Name of Person Providing Consent

_____ _____
Signature of Person Providing Consent Date

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Vita

Jason Adams was born in Fairbury, Illinois. He grew up and attended school on the west side of Bloomington, Illinois, before moving to Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, where he attended high school. He graduated from Illinois State University in 1998, where he received a Bachelor of Science in Education. He started his teaching career at Shorehaven Elementary School in Garland, Texas, and held that position for four years before moving to Chicago, Illinois, where he taught third grade at Heroes Ninos Elementary School. He returned to Garland, Texas, in 2003 and served as a teacher at Beaver Technology Center for Math and Science, a K-5 elementary magnet school focused on STEM curriculum in a collaborative setting. After earning a Master of Education degree from Texas A&M University-Commerce, he became assistant principal and then principal at that campus. Beaver Tech was an award-winning school at the regional, state, and national level, and regularly welcomed educational leaders who visited to examine its innovative instructional practices and 21st Century learning environment. In 2017, he was promoted to his current position as an area director in Garland ISD supervising principals at multiple campuses and levels, including two Accelerated Campuses of Excellence (ACE), models of successful school turnaround. He entered graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 2018, as a member of the 29th Cooperative Superintendency Program Cohort. Jason Adams is a devoted husband to his wife Alandra, and a caring father to his two sons, Ian and Lucas.

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